

Craig Littlepage
Athletic Director
McCue Center
PO Box 400846

8 February 2003

Dear Mr. Littlepage,

I'm writing to inform you of a deeply disturbing incident involving a representative of the athletic department that took place at the Poolside Cafe, a coffee shop that is operated by ARAMARK inside the AFC building on the grounds of the University of Virginia.

On February 7, I took my class of about 30 students to the Poolside Cafe. I frequently take my classes out of the classroom, since I find students are better engaged and learn more when their surroundings changed. I have taken similar groups of students on many occasions to the Starbucks that is outside the University grounds, and never had any complaints – in fact, they welcome us, and sometimes offer the students free drinks, even though (unlike the Poolside Cafe) they are usually full of customers when we arrive.

We arrived at the Poolside Cafe around 2:15, a time when it is always empty, as it was on February 7th. Some of the students lined up patiently to buy coffees and expensive smoothie drinks from the Cafe; others sat at the tables in the Cafe and began working on their assignment. None of the students did anything that would have been inappropriate at a library (other than drinking coffee, depending on the library). I went around the tables of students and helped them work on their assignment. At no time were all of the tables at the Cafe full, and my students did nothing at all improper while they were there.

The Cafe employee who was working at the cash register and preparing drinks, apparently was upset to have her usual afternoon quiet time disturbed by having actual customers to serve, and called her manager to complain. Her manager apparently agreed that having customers come into a cafe and order coffee was unusual, and called the UVa Intramural/Recreational Office and stated that there was an “emergency” at the Cafe. A representative from their office, Mark Leonida, came to the coffee shop, accosted me and told us to leave. I asked for an explanation why, and received a muddled explanation along the lines that since I had an official classroom assigned to my class, I should not

have brought them to the AFC to take up the precious space around the coffee shop that would be much better used by leaving it empty. Mr. Leonida ended the conversation by threatening to send the police. We decided to stay, since I believed the campus police would understand their role in the University community better than the athletic department representatives. The police never arrived and the students continued to work on their assignments, and buy and drink more coffee and smoothie drinks. Mr. Leonida called me later that afternoon to offer a veiled apology, which I would have accepted, expect he was apologizing for handling the situation unprofessionally, rather than for thinking it was inappropriate for a representative of the athletic department to believe there is something wrong with a professor taking a group of students to your building.

I am a firm believer in the right of a business to choose who they want to serve (except in ways that violate national discrimination laws) and to do what they want with privately owned property. If the Cafe were a normal business, I would find their decision to ask a large group of paying, well-behaved customers to leave to be bizarre and misguided, but not offensive enough to merit a complaint letter. However, by using an athletic department representative to threaten us, they have made it a larger issue than just their own business decision. I don't fully understand the relationship between ARAMARK leasing the space, the AFC and the athletic department, but when a representative of the athletic department believes it is reasonable to demand that a group of faculty and students studying and drinking coffee and smoothies should leave a space in a University building then I believe there is serious cause for concern.

I am one of the few faculty members I know who is generally supportive of the Athletic Department. One of my main reasons for wanting to come to UVa was to be at a University with a good soccer team; I regularly use your fitness facilities and on many occasions I have organized teams of faculty, graduate students and undergraduate students to participate in intramural leagues. Unlike some university athletic departments, I believe you are genuine in the vision you state eloquently on your website:

We will be that rare Athletics Department that will not only demonstrate our worth to the institution, but also will add value to it.

We will pursue this vision by:

- our commitment to education*
- providing comprehensive service to our communities*
- and by being a model for leadership*

In my view, the actions of your representative on February 7th violated all three of these points. You had an opportunity to make a positive contribution to the academic life of the University, but instead treated a group of students using space in your building for an academic exercise like a group of criminals.

I hope you take this incident as an opportunity to remind all employees in the athletic department of your stated vision and what it means to be part of the University community. I further hope that in future contracts to lease space in University facilities to businesses you will insist on clauses that make it clear that by entering into a contract with the athletic department those businesses are also becoming members of the University community and accepting the goals of your vision statement in all cases where it does not interfere with their business. In this case, we were acting as paying customers in a way that benefited their business also, but that should be irrelevant. I was told of another incident where a professor and group of students were evicted from the Poolside Cafe because they didn't buy enough coffee. I would like it to be clear in contracts leasing space in University buildings that faculty and students should be permitted to use that space for academic purposes regardless of how much coffee they actually buy, so long as they are not doing anything at all disruptive to the business. Then maybe next time a professor brings a group of students into the one of your buildings, they will be treated as community members instead of as criminals who need to be removed.

Sincerely,

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