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U's Labor Studies Takes Down Web Pages

The Labor Studies Center at Wayne State University (WSU), the target of a Mackinac Center publication's recent Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, has taken down the web pages fingered by the pro-free market group as being more about advocacy than a pursuit of any academic interests.

Harvey HOLLINS III, vice president of WSU Government and Community Affairs, told MIRS today that the websites in question are under review by the university's general counsel to make sure they are not running afoul of state law.

"We are reviewing the labor studies program to make sure we're in compliance of state law," Hollins said. "If it's someone's perception that it's advocacy, we can't change perception. All we need to know is that it's in compliance with the Michigan Campaign Finance Act."

Last week, the free market-based Mackinac Center made national headlines when its news outlet asked the labor departments at three state universities for any email in which faculty, using university computers, sent or received messages dealing with the collective bargaining fight in Wisconsin.

Michigan Capitol Confidential, using the state's FOIA law, asked officials at the University of Michigan, Michigan State University and WSU to provide any emails containing the words "Scott WALKER," "Wisconsin," "Madison," "Maddow" or any other Wisconsin-related message.

Walker is the governor of Wisconsin and "Maddow" is a reference to MSNBC commentator Rachel MADDOW (See "Mackinac Center FOIA Causing Stir," 3/29/11).

On Monday, Capitol Confidential Editor Ken BRAUN told MIRS that he was sniffing out a lead that WSU's labor studies department was acting more as an advocate for labor as opposed to a center for learning and research, which he said would not be proper for an institution that receives taxpayer money (See "Mackinac Center FOIA Causing Stir," 3/29/11).

By the time the Capitol Confidential published its story about WSU's Labor Studies Center, the university had taken down a link to a free "activists handbook" for those looking for a "nuts and bolts guide" for creating a living

wage campaign, a page dedicated to passing the federal "card check" and a specific manual for public employee unions trying to "defeat privatization."

Hollins noted that in 2005, when the Michigan Chamber of Commerce filed a Campaign Finance Act complaint about the Labor Studies Center, an offending page that advocated for a minimum wage increase was promptly taken down. A student had posted the page and when it was brought to the attention of university administration, it was taken down.

Hollins couldn't comment on whether the pages the Mackinac Center fingered fall in the same category, but that it was under review.

"We don't think that having labor or unions listed on a website is an advocacy point, even though the unions, obviously, are very active these days," Hollins said. "That's not the issue. The question is whether or not there's a violation of campaign finance laws given the content on the website."

"We don't want ballot initiatives on there. We don't want to advocate for the support of a political party -- Republican or Democrats. We don't want to see anything supporting a candidate on that website."

Braun said the fact WSU pulled down the material from the website is vindication in and of itself, but that more action needs to be taken outside of an internal review.

From his vantage point, the Labor Studies Center was acting like a political action committee. More questions need to be asked about the atmosphere at the Center, which would perpetuate this type of information from being posted in the first place.

"There is a Board of Governors that run this university. There is a Legislature that controls the purse strings. There is a Secretary of State. There is an Attorney General," Braun said. "There are a lot of other people with a lot fancier titles than me who should be looking into this. It shouldn't be taking someone like to me to be asking questions."

"What was this material doing on a public website in the first place? The taxpayers deserve answers."