

Subject: Faculty Concern Regarding Withholding of Diplomas

May 9, 2025

Gabe Willis
Dean of Student Advocacy Office
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Kristie Filipchuk
Associate Director of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity
Division of Student Affairs
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Dear Dean Willis and Associate Director Filipchuk,

We write with deep concern regarding the University's decision to notify at least three VCU students, just two days before graduation, that their degrees will not be conferred until a resolution on an arbitrary disciplinary action is reached. From what we understand, this disciplinary action is connected to an incident that occurred on April 29 in front of Cabell Library. We urge the administration to reconsider this course of action and to provide clear and public justification for such an extraordinary sanction.

To our knowledge, the students in question were engaged in peaceful, nondisruptive activity—sitting on the grass, working on homework, making art, talking with friends. We understand that university police escalated what was a pleasant informal gathering into an aggressive public confrontation in the center of campus, intervening based on a determination that the gathering constituted a “demonstration.” However, prior to the arrival of the police witnesses report no chanting, marching or other conduct typically associated with protest. We further understand that one student was arrested and others were dispersed after being informed that “Legal has determined this is a demonstration.” This statement raises important questions: Who makes such determinations, and on what criteria? What specific space-use policy or rule was violated?

While we recognize the importance of maintaining campus safety and order, we are concerned that disciplinary measures appear to have been applied based not on disruptive behavior, but on the perceived meaning or symbolism of this particular group of students, of what they may represent. As faculty members at VCU we are troubled by the precedent this sets for student expression and campus life.

To deny students their diplomas based on such vague and contested grounds risks undermining core values of fairness, transparency, and academic freedom. We respectfully request that the administration reconsider these punitive measures and provide a clear explanation for their basis.

Sincerely,

Rohan Kalyan, Associate Professor and Acting Director of the School of World Studies

Liz Canfield, Associate Professor, Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies

Frankie Mastrangelo, Associate Chair, Department of Sociology

Bradley Sinanan, Adjunct Instructor, VCUArts Department of Graphic Design

Jamie Cage, Associate Professor, School of Social Work

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Sonali Gulati, Professor, VCUarts Department of Photography & Film

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Michael Snell-Feikema, community member, Peace Praxis - Shenandoah Valley Antiwar Coalition

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