

[THM: Sent Dec. 15 to EMW]

Recently, The Hilltop Monitor was made aware of certain claims raised by members of the SMJP about some statements you've made about the SMJP itself. The Hilltop Monitor would like to formally invite you to respond to these statements...

Some of the claims are made by Hayley Michael, a former Jewell student and a member of the SMJP and a former member of the RRC. Michael claims that you made certain comments during a May 2022 forum that misrepresented her reasons for resigning from the RRC in February of 2022. Would you be willing to give the context in which you made these statements? What did you in fact say, to the best of your recollection, during this meeting? We understand that we are asking for what you said all the way in May, so we understand if you cannot remember the exact wording. We are interested, particularly, in what your response to Michael's claims might be.

If it helps, here is Michael's account of the May 2022 forum:

"Dr. MacLeod Walls stated that I only resigned from the RRC in April, right before the Beacon article came out (even though I resigned in February), and implied that Dr. Wilkins manipulated me into resigning because he was angry the administration refused his demands. She portrayed me as a weak-willed individual in front of 40+ faculty and the entire college cabinet, completely ignoring that I had resigned for principled moral and intellectual reasons."

Michael claims she presented her reasons for resigning the RRC in a letter to RRC commission members generally. Were you aware of this letter? We invite you to give your thoughts on the content of Michael's letter of resignation if you feel that would be helpful in clarifying your situation.

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The Hilltop Monitor would also like to formally invite you to clarify your email about the RRC, stating that "until we are clear on what is true regarding Jewell's founding, we cannot make decisions on how we should live, or move forward, as a twenty-first century institution of higher learning. Perhaps more importantly, it is the sole responsibility of the [Racial Reconciliation] Commission to determine what is true [about the college's founding]..." During the Student Meeting on Dec. 5, Armstrong stated that he believes that you regret the wording of this email. Could you clarify the context of this email? What did you mean, to the best of your recollection, by this email?

Finally, the Hilltop Monitor invites you to clarify claims you made that "no experts on campus are conducting research in the history of the College," during the RRC's town hall on Nov. 10.

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[EMW's Response to Dec. 15 E-mail]

The May 2022 forum was a closed forum involving faculty, administration, and some staff. Students did not attend. For this reason, I'm uncertain as to how Ms. Michael would have discerned information about comments made at the forum. As part of your journalistic process, this should be something that the Hilltop explores with her.

Dr. Smith and I received a question about students not being involved in the RRC and/or ending their membership with the RRC. Dr. Smith shared that we invited several students to be part of the RRC, and some participated; Ms. Michael was the most active student participant. I shared that when Dr. Wilkins made claims about his academic freedom, Ms. Michael left the RRC. This occurred around the time of one of the Beacon articles. Dr. Smith shared that he met with her to discuss her reasons for leaving, and the broad contents of their conversation. I do not recall Dr. Smith saying that she cited "principled and moral reasons" in her conversation, but rather that she felt that the student voice was drowned out by those of other members. Dr. Smith is copied on this email and I'm sure he would be pleased to add more information.

No, I have not heard that Ms. Michael sent a letter to the RRC, nor have I seen it.

3. I would say that even an English Literature Ph.D. doesn't get every communication right. This was the case with my August 2021 email. The RRC does not have the sole voice or the sole perspective on the College's past, but it was commissioned by me on behalf of the Board, and therefore is representative of the Board's intent to explore our history, share our history, and make recommendations on how we should respond to that history.
4. At the November RRC open house, I said that the RRC does not have an expert in Antebellum American History within its membership, and that we need it. I did not say that the College lacked such expertise. My comment about the RRC then prompted an exchange between Drs. Kotzin and Smith about various individuals who might serve that function for the RRC going forward, including a Professor at Ohio State whom Dr. Kotzin has volunteered to contact.

[THM Second Response – 02/06/2022]

... We investigated thoroughly the issue having to do with the May faculty meeting. In fact, we misspoke: Michael herself was not present at the meeting, but was informed about the meeting by faculty members.

The fact of the matter is that various parties present at the faculty meeting believed that you had unfairly represented Michael as a student expert. Namely: you misrepresented the timeline in which Michael resigned from the RRC, thereby implying that she had been manipulated by Wilkins into resigning, for the sake of making the administration and the RRC look bad in the press.

Michael resigned from the RRC on February 12th; in March 1st, Michael met with Dr. Smith to give her reasons as to why she resigned from the RRC. When she met with Dr. Smith, Michael recalls that Smith stated that you, the president, were aware of Michael's resignation [We have copied Dr. Smith on this e-mail, as we think this issue concerns both of you].

During the aforementioned faculty meeting, however you said that Michael resigned 10 days before the Pitch on academic freedom and the SMJP came out. This was said in the context of you discussing people who went to the media [namely, the Beacon and the Pitch] to misrepresent the administration's and the RRC's actions in conducting research in the history of the College. The impression from various individuals who attended the College was that you were portraying Michael as a weak-willed individual; one who resigned after being pressured by other members of the SMJP into resigning from the RRC for the sake of making the administration and the RRC look bad. Smith similarly supported your comments, stating that Michael felt conflicted while doing research for the RRC and SMJP – in fact, Michael contends, Michael was not allowed to do substantive research for the RRC, and she resigned for principled moral reasons.

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[You said that] The only student who was brave enough to join the RRC had resigned 10 days before the Pitch article came out. This was said in the context of you discussing people who went to the media [namely, the Pitch] to misrepresent the administration's and the RRC's actions in conducting research in the history of the College. This article was published on May 9th, of 2022 *[NOTE: actually, the relevant article was April 12, 2022]*. If you knew that Michael had resigned in February 12th (and certainly, so did Smith), why did you misrepresent the timeline of her resignation from the RRC? Can you explain precisely what you meant? It may be that you did not mean to imply that Michael left the RRC because she was manipulated into doing so, but the fact is that various individuals at the meeting felt that your comments were damaging to Michael's (and the SMJP's) reputation.

We bring these claims to you not to insult you, or incriminate you. But the fact of the matter is that we believe that there is a fundamental lack of trust between the student body and the administration; students at the College believe that the administration fails to communicate clearly with them, and in fact misrepresents their actions and their research. We want to give you an opportunity to respond because we feel that an explanation or clarification on your end would help to improve crucial institutional trust between the administration and the student body – without which, there cannot be a Jewell community.

[EMW's Response to Second Email]

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Thanks for this inquiry. The College has a shared governance process. The faculty and the administration adhered to that process, and today we are moving forward with a healthy and collaborative approach to becoming even stronger in our appreciation for academic freedom at Jewell.

Something perhaps that is important for the Hilltop to look into is that, until Dr. Wilkins expressed concern, the Board, administration, and faculty hadn't needed to revisit the Academic Freedom Policy as articulated in the Faculty Handbook for decades. Appreciation for academic freedom at Jewell had long since been known and supported.

To your additional point, if Hayley Michael, to quote your email, "was informed about the meeting by faculty members," then a breach of professional conduct occurred. I am copying the Faculty Council Chair and Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs to look into your observation.