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Rules or Revolution

Within the ECU Archives lies a speech given by the president of the college decades ago. This lone artifact shows how far a campus can come in just over seventy years. It tells of many rules and regulations that students were forced to obey. The speech given is a strict message for students to follow the conservative rules, mostly between coeds, that ECU had developed at the time. When reading it, one may sense a condemning tone in regards to many acts especially that of physical interaction between coeds. With this in mind, one must wonder if the conservative rules of the past have any correlation between the present sexual statistics on the same college campus. Perhaps this sense of sheltering in the past, not only at ECU but campuses all across the country, can be looked at as a reason for today’s shocking statistics of sexually transmitted diseases on college campuses. With the cultural changes that take place with time, there must be a way to keep people knowledgeable and aware of certain dangerous practices without creating specific rules. College campuses need to be a place where student’s are educated and not forced into rules or judged for what some may consider “sinful” acts. Over the past seven decades, ECU’s campus has altered drastically and three different pieces taken from the past could be seen as evidence to its change.

The first example of these strict rules implemented at ECU can be seen in a message given by the college’s president over seventy years ago. “Regulations Regarding Behavior was a chapel speech given by President Robert Wright used in two different occasions throughout the 1933/1934 school year” (Wright 1). The article starts off with a small disclaimer. “The following are excerpts from Robert H. Wright’s ‘Chapel Talks’ given to students every morning from 9:30 to 10:25 six days a week” (Wright 1). When first hearing of this “artifact,” one may be shocked to learn that there were even required chapel messages at all during ECU’s history. It is hard to picture having to go to a church service every morning before classes in today’s culture. Students and parents would be furious and the university would be thrown many cases of forced religion. With today’s attempts to be politically correct, it is almost certain that nothing like this could be forced any longer with so many broad religions practiced. However, the chapel services were not the issue but more of what was said in them. “The organization calls for study hour to begin at 7:30. People not living on campus must leave at that time. When leaving the library, you are expected to go immediately home” (Wright 1). The statements given seem so strict and overbearing. It is college, not a military boot camp; however, times have changed and it is easier to judge in retrospect.

One of the main themes seen in the messages was the concerns in coed relationships. The president of East Carolina talked about catching students hiding in the library with the lights off and having male students “walk” the female student’s home for forty-five minutes (Wright 1). Wright goes on to say that when he went in a room he found that the students were not studying (Wright 1). The president is basically saying that he walked in on people in the library in some sort of sexual act but all he says is that they were not studying. It is hard to know if he just doesn’t want to admit that acts like that are going on or if he is choosing to just pretend like it is not happening. Either way the avoidance of topics is not going to help anything. The subject seems to be so taboo that he won’t even address it but instead pretends to be angry that they are not studying. There is also mention of students getting in trouble for lying down on campus (Wright 2). These rules seem absurd and the way that they are being implemented sounds extreme.

Wright’s speech also has many tones of anger and pride throughout it. Perhaps if the students were spoken to with respect, they would be more willing to follow the rules. Instead, they are having the Bible thrown at them at being told to “refrain from the things that are sinful” (Wright 2). He goes on to talk to the students like they are children. “We are not going to put up with it this year. When I say ‘no’ just grin and take your medicine. I want the ‘hearty cooperation of the student body’ in this matter” (Wright 1). The speech is given as if the students were his slaves. There is definitely a place for respect for authority but when spoken to in such a tone the man is going to lose respect from the students and probably have them run in the opposite direction of every rule he is throwing at them. Consequently, that is exactly what happened.

The story in the January 29, 1959 editions of *The* *News and Observer* proved that perhaps ECU’s plan to shelter the students had backfired. “The Big Yellow, a large house off campus and near the Greenville business district, was the scene of a rollicking student party last January 10. It was raided by college officials and campus and town cops. Result of the raid was the 10-day suspensions of some 47 of the celebrants- and expulsion for the term of four of them” (Craven 1). The “Big Yellow House” scandal was something that surely rocked the ECU administration and woke them up to the realization that maybe they were not as in charge as they thought. “Students were suspended for four main reasons: inappropriate escorts, inappropriate conduct that reflected the college, signing out to go somewhere they never went, and attending an un-chaperoned party” (Craven). The new president of the school, J. D. Messick, said that such desires for unbridled freedom among students derived from a misrepresentation of free democracy (Craven 2). He warned that “discipline is necessary for successful acquisition of the fruits of college and that parents expect it” (Craven 2). When a student goes to a party, it is highly doubtful they are doing it from a “misrepresentation of free democracy” (Craven 2). It is likely the kids just want to have fun and are tired of the rules being forced upon them just to make their parents happy. Not much can be found on the differences between President Wright and President Messick, but after hearing both men’s views, it would be hard to say that they differ too much. Wright’s speeches against coed relationships, however, may have been considered slightly conservative in regards to the campaign that Messick launched. The campaign was launched in order to rid East Carolina against weekend parties, public necking, and any type of “boozing” (A Good-Night Kiss—How Long?). With the campaign in place, and the punishment from the yellow house incident, it seemed that the ECU body would finally fall into the standards and rules set for them, but almost the exact opposite occurred.

Over the years, ECU students began to stray from these rules and began exploring themselves and the taboos forbidden to them for so many years. Twenty plus years later, the “Yellow House” incident was long forgotten and the new subject to gossip about was the awakening going on throughout the nation. The Vietnam War was really the turning point in a lot of ways for people standing up for what they believed in. The war made an impact on American culture and broke the conservative trance that had been forced upon so many campuses. The student’s finally realized that they should not be required to follow rules that had no point or went against what they believed in. The war started protests, the hippy movement, and a sexual revolution. In an editorial published in *Fountainhead* the movement is best described as a “Sexual awakening” (Crawford paragraph 3*).* One of the main ways of expression throughout the campus was streaking. Too many it is a sexual act but the article describes streaking in a manner most would not normally associate. It says it is a “celebration of being alive, and of feeling secure enough and confident enough in living to streak…” (Crawford paragraph 5).

The cultural changes going on in the world also seemed to affect the administration as new rules began to be implemented allowing students more liberties. The writer of the article even talks about the progress ECU has made as a school. “By 1975, they had made visitation hours from 12 to 12 and there was one coed dorm and a promise of a second” (Crawford paragraph 4). The public was aware of the changes going but said that the changes made ECU go from “expected to human” (Crawford paragraph 6). This short statement sums up the mistakes made from the administration for many decades. They set an unattainable level of expectation on the student body when really they are just human and need room for error. The new rules finally allowed for ECU student’s to have some of the freedom they deserved. However, as the years passed, some of the freedom may have been taken too far.

Over the next 30 years, the number of students attending ECU increased as the enforcement of rules decreased. The “Sexual revolution” did not ever quite end on the campus as students continued on with their relationships. However, their actions did eventually catch up to them in a repercussion that has affected the entire campus. The revolution led to an increasing number of sexually transmitted diseases. It is now stated that one in four people on a college campus has, had, or will have some form of STD before graduation (Freeman 1). Is this a direct result from students fleeing from such a taboo culture into one of peace, love, and whatever feels good? President Wright created rules about abstaining from inappropriate relationships but never directly confronted them and instead just said that students were caught “not studying” (Wright 1). He would rather overlook the situation then address it. He pretended like it was better to act as though it doesn’t exist. President Messick was also similar but instead of overlooking he simply just created a campaign to abolish partying, kissing, and boozing (A Good-Night Kiss—How Long?). This campaign instead resulted in a party that got almost fifty students suspended. It took a war to finally show the students and administration that the need for such strict rules was unnecessary. The taboo was broken and the rebel against the rules was in full force landing ECU where it stands today. The pattern is evident and a correlation can be seen. The rules, the campaign, the awakening, the present, all are directly related. This isn’t to say that if President Wright had not been so strict to start with anything would be different? The past is behind and does not need to be focused on, however, it can be learned from in creating the future.

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