Professors Fault Virginia Tech's Tepid Defense of Colleague Caught Up in Free-Speech Controversy

By PETER SCHMIDT

Nearly 40 of Virginia Tech's faculty members have signed a letter protesting the university's distancing itself from an associate professor of English whose public critique of patriotic slogans angered some political conservatives.

The associate professor, Steven G. Salaita, became the target of threats, racist emails, and demands for his firing after the website Salon published his opinion essay arguing that public appeals to "support our troops" serve to discourage legitimate criticism of the nation's military actions while actually doing little to help military personnel or veterans.

Within days of the essay's publication, in August, Lawrence G. Hinckel, Virginia Tech's vice president for university relations, began sending people who complained about Mr. Salaita a statement that defended the faculty member's right to express his views but said those views "in no way represent an official university opinion."

It is common for college officials to emphasize that faculty members speak for themselves, and not their institutions, in commenting on controversial subjects, but Mr. Hinckel's statement went a step further. It concluded, "While our assistant professor may have a megaphone on salon.com, his opinions not only do not reflect institutional position, we are confident they do not remotely reflect the collective opinion of the greater university community."

In the letter, published last week in the Collegiate Times, an independent student-run newspaper, the faculty members criticized the university's statement as "wholly unsatisfactory" and "placing in doubt its commitment to academic freedom."

The letter called on Mr. Hinckel and Charles W. Steger, the president, "to reaffirm Virginia Tech's principles of free inquiry" and for Mr. Hinckel "to clarify that his words and actions did not represent the psyches or opinions of the diverse population at Virginia Tech, but his opinion alone."

Mr. Hinckel could not be reached for comment last week. Mark Owszczarski, assistant vice president for news and information, said the administration had no response to the faculty members' letter, which he called "a wonderful illustration" of academic freedom in action.

Benjamin E. Sax, an assistant professor of Judaic studies, said last week that he had helped enlist faculty members in signing the statement because "the university did not do a very good job of protecting Steven Salaita."

Mr. Sax said he found the university's response to Mr. Salaita's critiques "unsettling." He characterized Virginia Tech as "not a hospitable climate for difference."

For his part, Mr. Salaita said he was disappointed with the university's response. "I felt that they were at least inadvertently farming the flames of anger," he said.

Also stirring up criticism of his published essay were denunciations at examiner.com and on blogs such as Atlas Shrugs, which has helped promote the theory that Seung-Hui Cho, the student responsible for the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech, was an Islamic terrorist.

Mr. Salaita said he decided last month to take a position next academic year as an associate professor of American Indian studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He said his discussions with Illinois had begun before the controversy.

Steven Salaita publicly criticized "support our troops" appeals, and Virginia Tech responded with a statement that went beyond saying his views were not those of the institution.

With Support Services, Veterans Excel in Class

By LIBBY SANDER

When the Post-9/11 GI Bill took effect, in 2008, some observers worried that they either have taken part in training services offered by Operation College Promise, an organization for policy, research, and training, based in New Jersey, that pro-
veterans might not succeed at college. But new research shows that where support services for veterans exist, those students do well in the classroom.

The analysis, released last week, looked at 741 student veterans at 23 colleges. It found that, during the 2011-12 academic year, the veterans stayed enrolled, posted solid grade-point averages, completed nearly all of the credits they pursued, and included more than a few aspiring engineers and businesspeople.

What’s more, every one of the colleges reported having an on-campus veteran coordinator and a student-run veterans club or association. More than 80 percent give credit for military training, and have a website or web portal for veterans.

Among the services on the rise, the report says, is having an on-campus counselor who is trained in treating students suffering from traumatic brain injuries or post-traumatic stress disorder.

The report is titled “Completing the Mission II: A Study of Veteran Students Progress Toward Degree Attainment in the Post-9/11 Era.” The participating institutions, located in 20 states and the District of Columbia, are four-year brick-and-mortar nonprofit colleges; all but four are public.

duced the research, or have teamed up with the Pat Tillman Foundation, which offers scholarships to military students and contributed to the report.

Among the students, 20 percent of whom were female, the average GPA was 2.98. Each student earned nearly 91 percent, on average, of the credits he or she pursued that year. And nearly all—97 percent—who started in the fall semester came back for the spring term. The most popular majors were engineering, business, psychology, criminal justice, biology, and history.

Wendy A. Lang, director of Operation College Promise and the report’s lead author, said the goal was simple: “Now that we know these schools are providing these services, how are their students progressing?”

With the Post-9/11 GI Bill now in its fifth year, and the number of beneficiaries topping one million, calls for reliable data have increased. Just last week, Google announced a $3.2-million grant to four organizations to support national research that will assess student veterans’ academic performance and determine what kinds of campus-based programs are most effective in helping them.