

A Little Sunlight, Please....

In the United States, relatively few have the legal authority to put someone in handcuffs and lock him in a metal box.

Police officers who exercise that power must be sworn to "support the Constitution and laws of the United States" and those of his or her own state. Generally, they are under the authority of another sworn police officer, a chief, who is accountable to elected officials, who are in turn accountable to the people.

This "order of things" is designed to ensure that the law is enforced fairly and consistently, and only by those with the authority to enforce it.

The Duke University Police Department is different.

Since 2005, two University employees have had operational control over DUPD. Robert Dean was brought out of retirement to lead the department as Interim Director (not "Chief"). In 2005, his appointment was made permanent and supplemented by that of Aaron Graves as Associate Vice President for Campus Safety and Security.

Although they were at one point in their respective careers, neither Graves nor Dean is a sworn police officer accountable to the state for his actions. The Allen Building dictates their salaries and budget, and can fire them at will.

To the detriment of the campus community, it seems that such a lack of accountability to the state and to the law—coupled with Duke's typically opaque decision-making—has allowed the leadership of the department to run amok. And at the worst possible time, shortly after the murder of Duke graduate student Abhijit Mahato and a string of armed robberies perpetrated against students and staff.

Information provided by a number of officers, much of it confirmed on the record by Graves, paints a picture of an understaffed, demoralized organization, unable to meet the needs of the University community.

The officers I interviewed requested anonymity, since they could be fired for publicly discussing internal department matters.

According to the officers, DUPD's recent troubles started with the 2007 retirement of two of four DUPD majors (who report directly to Dean) and Graves' decision to fill the positions with two candidates with whom he had worked closely in the past.

Gloria Graham, a former captain in the University of Southern California Department of Public Safety, was hired into the first position over several internal DUPD candidates. Graves was Chief of Public Safety at USC, and had worked with Graham immediately prior to his arrival at Duke.

Compounding Graham's illegitimacy in the eyes of the officers was the requirement under North Carolina law that she spend her first five months on the job in the Durham City Police Academy, alongside other DUPD recruits and Durham Police Department trainees. Since USC Public Safety is not a state-recognized law enforcement agency, she is still awaiting her commission from the Office of the North Carolina Attorney General as a police officer.

Graves and Graham confirmed that she completed her training Jan. 11.

"It's unheard of for a Major to be in the Durham Police Academy. I think it's hilarious, that they didn't know or that they didn't care," said one officer.

Making matters worse, while at the Police Academy, Graham had an officer dispatched at 5:30 a.m. on Oct. 10 to her home in Durham to drive her sister to RDU Airport. DUPD Officer Scott Bilsky was taken off of the extended jurisdiction patrol

around East Campus in order to make the trip to RDU; such use of a patrol car violated Duke's policy on the "safety and use of Duke property."

Graves confirmed the incident but said, "that was looked into and it was dealt with" internally. The Duke Human Resources Web site indicates that the suggested corrective action for such a violation is "final written warning [before termination]" or "suspension."

Officers felt that Graves' connections actually bore fruit in his hiring of Michael Snellgrove into the other DUPD Major position.

Snellgrove formerly served as the Chief of the Southern Methodist University Police Department (a position previously held by Graves) and is a graduate of the FBI National Academy. Unlike Graham, Snellgrove was a fully commissioned police officer able to begin work immediately upon his arrival at Duke in June 2007.

"In terms of his qualifications, [Snellgrove] was probably the best thing this department ever had," said one officer.

By October, however, he had "resigned for cause," Graves confirmed. Snellgrove could not be reached for comment, and Graves declined to give the reason for his resignation.

Snellgrove's duties—which included primary responsibility for DUPD's crime prevention programs—were largely assumed by a new, junior-level hire, David Williams. By all accounts, Williams had no experience with crime prevention on a college campus and is a friend of Graves' from his service in the Air Force.

Graves acknowledged, "I was in the Air Force from 1972 to 1992. I know Dave Williams and quite a few other people who I was assigned, stationed with, worked with during that 20-year period."

Graves also confirmed the zinger frequently mentioned by DUPD officers:

"Prior to coming here, [Williams] was working as a manager in food service."

For a time, Williams held the title of "Major." He now holds the title of "Director of Crime Prevention."

Graves responded to criticism of the hires by lauding Williams' and Graham's past achievements and arguing that their relationship with him is an added benefit.

He said of Williams, "The guy has experience, this guy is a leader, and this guy is well-trained. Because of personal reasons, he had to take a step back in his life, and I can't hold that against him."

But to the rank-in-file of the department, the (entirely avoidable) circumstances surrounding the hires are an embarrassment.

And further hurting morale is a policy, characterized differently by DUPD leadership than by line officers, requiring officers to get permission before making an arrest or taking someone into custody.

On Sept. 2, Major Phyllis Cooper wrote in an e-mail, "Officers should consult with [their immediate supervisor] before taking anyone into custody or arresting anyone." The e-mail added that officers could only proceed with the approval of Dean or Graves, who lack police powers themselves.

Nine days later, Dean clarified the policy as one that required mere "notification," not "permission" to execute an arrest.

Last week, however, Graham prevented officers from obtaining a warrant to search an Epworth Dormitory room.

"We make split-second decisions, and we have to make a judgment call very quickly. If you begin to question that judgment and have officers question their ability to do their

job in that respect, you are not only going to put that officer's safety in question, but the public's safety in question," said an officer about the confusion over the policy.

And to that end, the ultimate issue is whether DUPD is adequately equipped to protect the University community.

One officer summed up DUPD's response to the recent crime wave by detailing its handling of a recent community forum featuring Graves, Dean and Durham Police Chief Jose Lopez. The meeting was held in the CIEMAS building near Science and Research drives.

"They had patrol units that were assigned just to drive up and down Research Drive, before and after the meeting, just to make it appear that there was a heavy police presence. I just don't think they know how to deal with real issues. It's all about perception," said the officer.

Another officer added that while DUPD was patrolling the nearby, but unoccupied section of campus, "The Subway was robbed on Erwin Road during that meeting."

Entering my final semester at Duke, I have had the pleasure to know many Duke police officers. They have helped me in situations ranging from Last-Day-of-Classes debauchery to car-breakdowns to bike accidents, and work 12-hour shifts in order to keep all of us safe. Unlike Durham police officers, I trust them to do their jobs.

Their intent in revealing this information, and my intent in publishing it, is to subject the leadership department the scrutiny normally endured by municipal departments.

It's a shame that the leadership of the department needs a bludgeoning in The Chronicle before addressing issues raised by its own officers.

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