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Robertson Scholars' ticket ban to remain

BY RAY GRONBERG, The Herald-Sun

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Duke University administrators say they won't step in to reverse a student government decision that bars some beneficiaries of a joint scholarship program with UNC from joining this year's Krzyzewskiville basketball-ticket campout.

The decision to bar members of the Robertson Scholars program based at UNC from participating in the campout was "over the top," but administrative intervention isn't the right answer, said Larry Moneta, Duke's vice president for student affairs.

"To force anything, even if we could, would just exacerbate the animosity and the tension," Moneta said. "We thought it was a mistake to take a prohibitionist approach. But we're going to leave it up to the students to work it out."

The Robertson Scholars Program is a \$24 million scholarship effort that allows a select group of students from Duke and UNC to take courses at both universities. In addition, they swap schools for one semester in the spring of their sophomore year.

One of the key features of a program that is "unequaled in American higher education," according to its sponsors and officials on both campuses, is the idea that participants have "full student privileges" on both campuses. That includes access to courses, faculty, research opportunities and arts, cultural and sporting events.

The scholars program is supposed to promote collaboration between the two schools and help them recruit the best undergraduates each year, according to its Web site.

But Duke's student senate voted last month to bar UNC Robertsons from this spring's ticket campout because a group of them went to last year's Duke-UNC game in Cameron Indoor Stadium and sat in the student section wearing UNC paraphernalia.

Supporters of the ban claimed that the Robertsons' actions ruined last spring's game for many Duke students and said they don't want a repeat performance when the two teams meet this year in Cameron.

Student leaders also made it clear they don't have much use for inter-campus collaboration, according to reports in the Duke Chronicle, the university's student newspaper.

"It's not our role to support the institutional interests of the Robertson program," the paper quoted Paul Slattery, Duke Student Government chief of staff, as saying during last month's senate debate.

The vote has drawn protests from the Robertson program's executive director, former UNC political science professor Eric Mlyn.

"There's no doubt in my mind that what Duke Student Government has done is clear violation of the spirit of the Robertson Scholars Program," Mlyn said, adding that he's also rebuked the UNC

Robertsons for their actions at last year's game.

Despite the promises made on the program's promotional Web site, it's not clear Duke's student government violated any contracts that exist involving Duke, UNC and Julian Robertson, the New York City philanthropist who endowed the scholarship.

Their agreement "talks about vision and mission and goodwill," but administrators on the two campuses have had to work out a lot of the particulars on the fly, Mlyn said.

"Some things come up you don't anticipate, and you have to figure out how they'd be treated by the other campus," he said. "My view is they should be treated exactly as other students. But sometimes that's not always the case, for example in programs funded with grants. We've confronted a few of those [problems] over the years and always settled them very amicably."

Student government leaders say they're confident there's nothing in writing between the two schools and Robertson that would threaten their decision.

"If we were running afoul of contractual obligations, then the university would have the power to step in," said Kevin Troy, a spokesman for Duke Student Government President Elliott Wolf. "We're not, which is why they're not doing anything."

Troy added that the campout ban doesn't necessarily bar UNC-based Robertsons from getting into Cameron for the Duke-UNC game. Although most of the available tickets are distributed at the campout, some are held back for game-day walkups. The Robertsons can go the walkup route if they wish.

At UNC, Duke Robertsons wishing to attend games "have exactly the same rights and privileges that [all other] UNC students do," Mlyn said, adding that they've availed themselves of that in the past.

Student-ticket distributions for games at the much-larger Smith Center are handled through an online lottery. UNC does weight the system to give seniors a better chance of getting tickets to the Duke game, which would work against the chances of Duke Robertsons and other sophomores.

It is possible that this year's ban at Duke could be a one-time thing. Student government revamps the campout policy each year, and Mlyn acknowledges that he's continued to lobby student leaders and Duke administrators.

In July he's due to hand the reins of the program to Tony Brown, a professor in Duke's Sanford Institute of Public Policy.

"We're more than willing to engage in a dialogue about this," Troy said. "There will inevitably be another conversation about this in a year. This is by no means written in stone. This is in response to the incident that occurred last year."

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