

LEADERSHIP

When a Chancellor Blocks a Student on Twitter

By Arielle Martinez

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Twitter has been both a blessing and a burden for college presidents and chancellors.

Some, like the University of Cincinnati's president, [Santa J. Ono](#), can attract tens of thousands of Twitter followers and use that following to promote their institutions. Others, like [R. Bowen Loftin](#), before his resignation last fall as the University of Missouri at Columbia's chancellor, have attempted to engage with concerned students over Twitter during times of crisis.

But it's unheard of for a college leader to take the most drastic measure Twitter provides to respond to a student's tweets: blocking them.

That's what happened last week to Anniken Williams, a senior majoring in political science and international studies at East Carolina University. She took to Twitter to express her disdain for the record of Cecil P. Staton, the university's new chancellor, who as a Republican state senator in Georgia sponsored a bill that became law requiring residents to show identification in order to vote.

Ms. Williams, vice president of the College Democrats of North Carolina, asked in one tweet on June 29: “How am I supposed to support my ‘chancellor’ when he supported voter ID laws that disenfranchises students?” In another tweet, she criticized the University of North Carolina system’s president, Margaret Spellings, for nominating Mr. Staton to serve as chancellor.

[@MargaretEdu](#) [@ecuchancellor11](#) how am I supposed to support my “chancellor” when he supported voter ID laws that disenfranchises students?

— Anniken Williams (@Anniken_Marie) [June 29, 2016](#)

[@MargaretEdu](#) put a Republican politician in charge of my university. This is a school. Not a state legislature. [@ecuchancellor11](#)

— Anniken Williams (@Anniken_Marie) [June 29, 2016](#)

Two days later, on July 1, the new chancellor’s first day on the job, Ms. Williams said she found that Mr. Staton had blocked her on Twitter.

OUR CHANCELLOR BLOCKED ME. Wow what mature leadership. [#ecu](#)
pic.twitter.com/EQkGui6KFp

— Anniken Williams (@Anniken_Marie) [July 1, 2016](#)

The chancellor had also apparently changed his Twitter bio to read “Fair warning: social media bullies and trolls will be blocked,” and later, “On Twitter to boost ECU, not to respond to political statements. Abusers may be blocked.”

A friend sent this to me. Apparently I’m a bully/troll for being concerned about my university. pic.twitter.com/kFZ7NaQlDC

— Anniken Williams (@Anniken_Marie) [July 3, 2016](#)

Here we go again. Another inaccurate bio. pic.twitter.com/AeU4A2yan1

— Anniken Williams (@Anniken_Marie) [July 5, 2016](#)

Ms. Williams chronicled the developments in a post on the blogging platform [Medium](#) last week.

Twitter users at the University of North Carolina came to Ms. Williams's defense using the hashtag #AlreadySilencingStudents.

[#alreadysilencingstudents](#) and calling them abusive, trolling bullies [@ecuchancellor11](#) <https://t.co/4CJwtyyKh1>

— M to the.... (@THRD_PWR) [July 5, 2016](#)

[@ecuchancellor11](#) you're setting the tone for how you plan to govern ECU. One you should be deeply ashamed of. [#alreadysilencingstudents](#)

— Sarah Muzzillo (@sarah_muzz) [July 1, 2016](#)

Hi Twitter logging in to vocalize my support of [@Anniken_Marie](#) [#alreadysilencingstudents](#) way to go unc system, really listening to students

— Alanna Davis (@alannalikeatl) [July 1, 2016](#)

Mr. Staton has since unblocked Ms. Williams. But his initial action demonstrates how quickly administrators can find themselves taking heat after just a few clicks.

"Students' voices are important and their questions welcome," Mr. Staton said in a written statement on Wednesday. "But I want students to have ways to engage with me face to face — particularly on complex issues where positive dialogue is so important to increased understanding."

A spokeswoman for the university, Mary Schulken, said in an email that Mr. Staton manages his own Twitter account, which he set up himself after being confirmed as chancellor by the University of North Carolina system's Board of Governors, in April. He describes himself as "relatively new to social media," Ms. Schulken said.

Ms. Williams said that, as millennials, most college students use platforms like Facebook and Twitter to voice their concerns about college leaders. "I don't think most students nowadays sit down and schedule a meeting with said individual and go in and meet with them," she said. "It's more over social media."

Ms. Williams also said that she did not expect a response from Mr. Staton when she posted the initial tweets criticizing him. "I was expecting what Margaret Spellings did, just completely ignoring it," she said. But Mr. Staton "went so far as to block me, and I think that if he had just ignored me, that would have been fine. Obviously I would have preferred an answer, but I think not blocking me would have been better than anything," she said.

Ms. Williams said she would attend a meeting on Friday with the chancellor and leaders of several student organizations.

"I'm going to try to make it clear that he needs to talk to students not just on his own terms, because to me that's what that statement says: 'I'll talk to you, but on my own terms and conditions,'" she said. "And that to me doesn't seem like a very open dialogue."

This fall Mr. Staton will begin posting open office hours each week when students can come in to speak with him, he said in the statement. He added that he encourages students to stop him for conversations when they see him on the campus.

"I use my Twitter account primarily to promote ECU," he said, "but don't find 140 characters to be a helpful format for insightful dialogue about complex issues."

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