



## **Brown meets to deal with protest that halted police commissioner's speech**

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By Linda Borg

PROVIDENCE — Brown University President Christina H. Paxson convened the campus Wednesday night to hold a civil discussion on what some called a remarkably uncivil event.

Paxson, in an interview with The Providence Journal Wednesday, said she scheduled the forum because “I think right now the community is very divided.”

Raucous protesters on Tuesday forced the university to close a lecture by New York City Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly, whose stop-and-frisk policy has morphed into a huge civil rights issue. A federal judge has ruled the policy, under which tens of thousands of people in New York City, the vast majority of them minorities, have been stopped and searched by the police, unconstitutional.

The incident at Brown, which was widely reported, provoked an immediate response from Paxson, who issued a letter to members of the Brown community that said, “Our university is — above all else — about the free exchange of ideas. Nothing is more antithetical to that value than preventing someone from speaking and other members of the community from hearing that speech and challenging it vigorously in a robust but civil manner.”

Hundreds of students flocked to Alumnae Hall for the Wednesday night discussion of civility. University officials earlier had scheduled the session for another location, but changed the venue when it appeared the crowd would be large.

Marissa Quinn, university vice president for public affairs, said members of the media would not be allowed to observe the proceedings. The Brown Daily Herald, however, tweeted reports from the forum.

In an email Wednesday to the Brown community, Paxson said she hoped the forum “would begin a conversation with the goal of bringing our community together,” and indicated that this would be the first of several such discussions.

When Kelly took the stage, campus and community protesters repeatedly heckled the commissioner, after which university administrators were unable to regain control of the crowd.

“Our goal was for the lecture to be canceled from the beginning,” Irene Rojas-Carroll, one of the student organizers, told the Brown Daily Herald. She said that there was no forum in which Kelly would be an appropriate speaker at Brown.

Marion Orr, director of the Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions, which sponsored the event, said he was surprised and disappointed by the protesters’ lack of civility.

But Orr commended Paxson for turning this event into a teachable moment.

“President Paxson is showing great leadership by pulling together the community to think about what we mean when we talk about freedom of expression,” he said. “This is a wonderful first step.”

This isn’t the first time that Brown has been roiled by a free speech debate.

In 2001, a student group canceled an appearance by arch-conservative David Horowitz after several students expressed concern that his visit might spark a violent protest. Previously, an inflammatory article by Horowitz in the student newspaper touched off a week of protests that began with the theft of 4,000 copies of the paper.

And in 2008, a Brown student threw a pie at New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman. She was suspended for one semester.

The latest protest, which included local community organizers, has drawn a sharp rebuke from nearly every corner.

A senior legal fellow from the conservative Heritage Foundation said that Brown should expel the student organizers behind the protest and suspend those that participated, depending on the depth of their involvement.

“What they did strikes at the very heart of the fundamental principles that undergird the academic setting,” said senior legal fellow Hans von Spakovsky.

He said colleges have permitted these types of protests to flourish because they have established rules that restrict free speech. “You can get in big trouble if your speech offends someone,” Spakovsky said.

“The tolerant left is increasingly proving itself to be intolerant,” said Trevor Burrus, a research fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. “The unfortunate truth is that many of the professors at Brown probably agree with the students’ actions.”

But the majority of students and alumni who wrote letters Wednesday to the Brown Daily Herald expressed their unequivocal support for a free exchange of ideas, saying that free speech is the linchpin of a liberal arts education.

“The student body and administration should be embarrassed by the behavior of the intolerant goons who prevented the speech,” said Jonathan Bastian, Class of 1989. “Despite all of the proclamations of the liberal Brown University as a place of tolerance and diversity, modern liberalism rears its ugly head of truth: It only tolerates those who think ‘correctly.’”

While she doesn’t condone the protest, Toby Ayers, executive director of Rhode Island for Community and Justice, understands the deep anger that fuels these behaviors. Minority groups have been racially profiled by the authorities for years, she said, and “it’s hard for people to get over that and so their emotions get the better of them.”

Ayers encourages people to “talk and talk until you are exhausted and then you talk some more.”

“I would encourage people to become involved in the conversations that are already going on,” she said. “There are all sorts of opportunities to build a solution.”