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Barbara Hollingsworth: U.Va.'s dishonorable double standard

By: [Barbara Hollingsworth](#)
Local Opinion Editor
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By Barbara F. Hollingsworth

University of Virginia students pledge not to lie, cheat or steal under the nation's oldest student-run honor system -- and to report any of their peers who do.

But U.Va. administrators apparently don't think they have an obligation to do the same. On April 23, university officials received a subpoena from Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli requesting the e-mails of former U.Va. climatologist Michael Mann in an investigation into whether Mann fraudulently used manipulated climate data to apply for \$500,000 worth of taxpayer-funded research grants.

At first, they indicated their intention to comply. However, angry protests from academics around the country accusing Cuccinelli of a "witch hunt" convinced them to take a second look at their "options." But those options boil down to two: Turn over the documents subpoenaed under the Virginia Fraud Against Taxpayers Act by the July 26 deadline, or ignore Cuccinelli's request for any "correspondence, messages or e-mails" between Mann and 39 other prominent scientists between 1999 and 2005.

The list includes Phil Jones, former head of the University of East Anglia's Climatic Research Unit who resigned under fire, and the CRU's Keith Briaffa, also of Climategate fame. On Dec. 13, 2009, Del. Bob Marshall, R-Manassas, had requested the same information under Virginia's Freedom of Information Act.

On Dec. 17, Assistant Vice President for Public Affairs Carolyn Wood told Marshall: "The University does not have any e-mail data for Mr. Mann. When Mr. Mann moved to Penn State his U.Va. account was terminated and all data was later deleted."

Wait a minute. If Mann's e-mails were all deleted, why did U.Va. ask for-- and receive -- an extension to comply with Cuccinelli's subpoena? By happenstance, university officials also received another FOIA request on Dec. 17 regarding another former U.Va. climatologist -- Patrick Michaels, now a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

But Michaels' correspondence was apparently not deleted after he left; Greenpeace is reportedly currently waiting for word on how much it will cost to duplicate his e-mail cache. So even though Mann

and Michaels worked in the same department on the same floor and used the same computer server, U.Va. supposedly preserved one scientist's electronic trail -- and destroyed the other's.

Mann is the author of the infamous "hockey stick" graph that purportedly showed the Earth's temperature rising at an accelerated rate. Even though the hockey stick has been debunked, Mann was cleared of any academic wrongdoing in February.

Michaels, on the other hand, never bought into the mass global warming hysteria. At U.Va., he warned that signing on to the Kyoto Protocol would have "no demonstrable [effect on] climate change" -- but "easily demonstrable economic damage." The politically correct Mann went on to run his own climate lab at Penn State.

Michaels was treated more harshly than the Vatican treats heretics and was eventually forced out of U.Va. In a strange twist to this story, Canadian statistician Steve McIntyre, whose analysis of Mann's hockey stick graph helped expose Climategate, is on Mann's side in this dispute.

McIntyre believes academics should be allowed to police themselves. That would be fine if they were all treated equally by institutions of higher learning, which is clearly not the case here.

And when scientists use public funds to promote an ideologically driven agenda like global warming that has profound implications outside the ivory tower, public officials like Cuccinelli have not only the right, but the duty, to protect the taxpaying public from being ripped off.

Barbara F. Hollingsworth is the Examiner's local opinion editor. She can be reached by e-mail at: bhollingsworth@washingtonexaminer.com.

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