American Civil Liberties Union - Montana (ACLU-MT)

Indigenous Peoples' Rights

https://www.aclumontana.org/en/cases/sweetgrass-society-v-montana-state-university-northern

Campaign and Advocacy

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The Sweetgrass Society is the only Native American student group on campus at Montana State University-Northern. Students in the group experienced racial discrimination and violation of their First Amendment rights stemming from an incident involving the universitys Hello Walk, an outdoor staircase where student clubs annually paint a step with a message of their choice. In 2016, the Sweetgrass Society included a #NoDAPL message on its step. #NoDAPL refers to a grassroots Indigenous movement that began in early 2016 in response to the approved construction of Energy Transfer Partners' Dakota Access Pipeline. The movement earned significant media attention when the opposition of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe over the pipelines route through sacred burial grounds brought together Native people from across the country. Later, the Sweetgrass Societys #NoDAPL message was the only group stair painted over and the club alleged the act was a racially motivated violation of their members First Amendment rights. The ACLU of Montana filed a complaint on their behalf with the Montana Human Rights Bureau. In December, 2017, the parties negotiated a resolution to the complaint. As part of the agreement, the administration and Sweetgrass Society agreed to develop a diversity education program for students, faculty, and staff that includes implicit bias training.

MSU-Northern has also formed an American Indian Advisory Council as a forum to seek input from local tribal cultural experts. This group held its first meeting on January 31, 2018, and will meet on a regular basis to provide the Chancellor with observations and suggestions that will help enhance the student experience for Northerns Native students and the entire student body

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