

Hairy debate grips school

Students penalized for some styles

Megan Scott, The Associated Press

No dreadlocks. No cornrows. No free-flowing braids.

That's the rule for students in a class that's part of a five-year business program at private, historically black Hampton University, which says it is trying to prepare students for the conservative corporate world.

Is Hampton -- or American business, for that matter -- saying that for black people to get ahead, they need to have a hairstyle that isn't too ... black? Or are students simply learning a corporate lesson that applies to workers of all races -- that to succeed in business, you need to conform?

The hair restrictions apply to a leadership seminar in a combined bachelor's and master's of business administration program that requires students to maintain a B average, dress professionally, complete two internships and meet with business leaders.

The restrictions, in place for almost six years, recently became an issue when a student with braids complained to the media, said Sid Credle, dean of the business school in Hampton, Va.

Sophomore Sean Linder had refused to cut his two-strand twists; as a result, Linder said, he wasn't allowed to attend the weekly leadership seminar and meet with business leaders. He did other assignments to make up for missing the course.

"The way I feel is this: It is possible in corporate America that I will be judged because of my hair and that my hair may hinder me," Linder says. "But just because I may be discriminated against in corporate America, doesn't mean I should be discriminated (against) in school."

In an e-mail message Credle wrote to alums, the dean said the rule is intended to prepare students for the corporate world.

"We recently had a career fair on campus with approximately 200 representatives of 100 corporations, firms and agencies," Credle wrote. "Ninety-five percent of these representatives were black. None had extreme hair; and all were conservatively dressed."

Credle says the hair code is more for male students, and that only two or three have complained since it was implemented.

Still, the rules thrust Hampton into the spotlight. Susan Taylor, the editorial director for Essence magazine who has worn her hair in braids for 25 years, canceled a Hampton visit in protest. Several alums say they can no longer support the business program.

Others see the rule as well-intentioned, and not an effort to diminish Afrocentric culture.

Natural hairstyles "are identified with being very free spirited," said Carl Taylor, who directs youth development programs at Michigan State University. "People who are going into a corporate America are joining a team, almost a colony."

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Condoleezza Rice wears a conservative hairstyle, as does



Kenneth I. Chenault, CEO of American Express.



Essence editor Susan Taylor opposes the hair rules.