

After report on Falwell, Liberty University students organize campus protest

by [Will Young](#) in the [October 9, 2019](#) issue



Jerry Falwell Jr., president of Liberty University (Steve Helber/AP)

In the wake of reports alleging objectionable rhetoric and conduct by Liberty University president Jerry Falwell Jr., about 200 students at the evangelical Christian school gathered at a protest on campus on September 13. Student organizers estimated that about 60 of the demonstrators were there to demand an investigation of the president and his administration.

“We are not calling for Falwell to resign right now,” said Elizabeth Brooks, a sophomore at the school and the main organizer of the protest. But in a mission statement, Brooks wrote that the official position of the demonstration is to “bring to light the truth of these allegations of various misconduct.”

Brooks did not elaborate on the allegations, only stating that the protest comes in response to an article by Brandon Ambrosino that appeared in *Politico* that quotes current and former members of Falwell’s “inner circle” describing Liberty as a “dictatorship” and more of a “real estate hedge fund” than a university.

The article portrayed Falwell bragging to employees about his sex life and attending a nightclub and later denying it, claiming photos of him at the club were altered. He is also accused in the article of dealing university contracts to friends and family.

Some of the allegations had been reported in other outlets over the past few months, but after the most recent revelations, described as based on emails and interviews with Falwell aides and employees, Brooks and fellow Liberty student Ian Parish, who is assisting with the protest's efforts, said they have seen a shift in the student body against Falwell that hasn't been seen in the school's recent history.

"The mood is changing from 'We wish Jerry would keep quiet' to 'We wish we had better representation for our school,'" Parish said before the protest. "Jerry doesn't have our best interests at heart. He doesn't share Liberty's mission statement to train champions for Christ."

Falwell and Liberty University declined to respond to requests for comments about the protest. Afterward, Falwell tweeted his congratulations to the students for their conduct. "The ones who had concerns and the ones who supported me were both respectful and not angry—very Christlike—in their behavior."

Brooks said that she met with members of the Student Government Association the day before the protests to talk about her plan. In prior protests students have planned on campus, the SGA has pressured protesting students to cancel demonstrations in favor of remedial solutions.

In this instance, Brooks said, "SGA declined to give us public support, but they were very receptive to what we were saying, asking, 'What can we do to listen to you better, to help you get this [request to protest] through?' They were definitely receptive to our mission."

Current students and alumni also voiced support on social media after the protest was announced. "LU students, we cannot stand for this anymore," wrote current Liberty student Rachel Mayer on Twitter. Eric McGowan, who called himself "another proud alumni," cautioned, "Watch out for LUPD [Liberty University Police Department]. They have been used by admin to . . . harass past efforts similar to this led by me and my friends."

Brooks and Parish, whom Falwell has blocked on Twitter for their repeated criticism, had said that they anticipated a turnout of no more than two dozen students.

Brooks doesn't expect the protest to result in an immediate investigation into Falwell's conduct. Rather, she and Parish said they believe it is important to inform Liberty administrators where students stand. They hope to provoke a public apology from Falwell concerning degrading emails that, according to a Reuters article, he sent about Liberty students and staff in years past.

In one email, according to the article, Falwell called a student "retarded," and in another he called Liberty's current police chief, Richard Hinkley, a "half-wit."

"It's sickening to see your university president saying these things and not facing any repercussions," Brooks said about the emails.

Responding to the *Politico* article, Liberty released a statement that contained "omitted statements of Liberty University regarding business transactions recently questioned in media."

The "omitted information" includes 19 pages of purportedly unredacted transcripts of interviews of Falwell with Ambrosino and other journalists, along with an email from Liberty chief operating officer Randy Smith, which Liberty claimed journalists "refused to print."

Liberty University's official Twitter page also tweeted: "The truth about Liberty that the press refused to print in recent articles, is now published here: #FakeNews."

—Religion News Service