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# UMass won't censor Harambe jokes

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By **Steve Annear**

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Despite swirling rumors and media reports, University of Massachusetts Amherst officials said this week that the school has no plans to crack down on the use of jokes and memes on campus about Harambe, the gorilla who was killed at a Cincinnati zoo in May after a 3-year-old boy fell into the animal's enclosure.

“As an institution that values free speech and the exchange of ideas, UMass Amherst has not taken any steps to ban jokes or references about Harambe the gorilla,” school administrators said Tuesday in a statement.

Officials issued their statement about the gorilla after an e-mail was sent by two resident



JEFF MCCURRY/CINCINNATI ZOO AND BOTANICAL GARDEN

**Harambe, a western lowland gorilla, was fatally shot at a Cincinnati zoo in May.**

assistants to

60 students

living on a floor in Sycamore Hall, one of the university's dormitories.

[The message](#), which was shared widely online and picked up by media outlets [both locally and nationally](#), urged the students to refrain from making jokes about Harambe — specifically, writing them on whiteboards on the dormitory floor — because they could be seen as “micro-aggressions.”

They pointed out that the African Heritage Student Community, one of UMass Amherst's [Defined Residential Communities](#), is called “Harambee,” after the Swahili word meaning, “the point at which things come together.”



## Months after Harambe's death, he returns in memes

The Web lost interest in Harambe, but lately it's come back.

Jokes involving Harambe the gorilla on social media have, in some instances, been [hateful and racist](#). The resident assistants called them “crude” and “derogatory.”

“[Harambee] has a very positive connotation,” the resident assistants wrote. “But current social

media has been misrepresenting it. The [Harambee] floor has been in existence for many years, so any negative remarks regarding 'Harambe' will be seen as a direct attack to our campus's African-American community."

Harambe the gorilla has also become the mascot for a tongue-in-cheek movement and slogan that suggest males expose themselves in a show of support for the animal. Such actions run "the risk of being reported as a Title IX incident," the resident assistants said.

"These are sexual assault incidences that not only get reported to community standards, but also the dean of students," the e-mail said.

But school administrators thought they needed to clarify their stance, given the media attention. They said that while the "two well-intentioned" resident assistants may have been trying to foster a positive atmosphere for all students, there's no official ban on Harambe humor.

"The e-mail . . . was a cautionary attempt to advise new students on their floor that the Harambe reference could be considered offensive," officials said. "The resident assistants were upholding their responsibility to encourage an inclusive living environment for the students on their floor."

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