

Where will you go?

The Cranky Professor

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"I want to go to Wall Street," declares the maroon shirt in the recruiting poster for Saint Mary's University; "Not Main Street." Whenever I pass the bus shelter that features this poster, the shelter on South Park near Inglis, I want to say to the people waiting for the bus, "No, no, it's not like that at all! Actually, Saint Mary's is a wonderful place at which to study and grow!"

What an awful ad campaign. It's loud, it's obnoxious, it espouses values many Santamarians reject, and, worst of all, it sends to potential students entirely the wrong message.

So what's so bad about Main Street? What's so great about Wall Street? "I want to get into foreign policy. Bono style." Does Bono have a foreign policy? Could Saint Mary's help a student to acquire Bono's main tool of influence, celebrity? "I want to make gazillions. And then give it all away." You would think that a university would want to attract people concerned about social justice, about structures of power that enable a few to make gazillions from the labour of others, rather than to attract people smitten by the romance of philanthropy. "I want sand between my toes. And smarts between my ears." Yes, the point of an Arts education is to equip a person to read on the beach.

Universities, at least ideally, are places at which people, especially young people, are invited and encouraged to examine their world and to think hard about it. Universities are communities of intellectuals. For four years a student at a university lives as a member of such a community. She experiences firsthand the rigours and joys of living the life of the mind and discovers how that life can be appreciated for its own sake. The point of a university, then, is what happens *at* the university. The measure of the university is the quality of the life lived there. The point is not the degree earned at the end of the experience, nor is it the training or the credentials that one acquires through attending a university.

The current Saint Mary's ad campaign has nothing to do with the quality of life at Saint Mary's. It does not portray Saint Mary's as a place at which students participate in inquiry and learning for its own sake. Quite the opposite. The ads tell us that Saint Mary's is all about training and credentials, that a university education is all about what happens after one graduates. The point of university, according to the ads, is to make one attractive to employers and to prepare one to get on with the next round of things.

That is absolutely the wrong message to send to the world. It misrepresents the university in the worst way. If this ad campaign has any effect on recruitment, it might well attract young people who couldn't care less about the life of the mind and repel those keen to live it. Politicians and

policy makers and the public generally already misapprehend the nature and purpose of the university; the current ad campaign can only confirm for them their mistaken view. The political decisions they make regarding higher education will be decisions informed by these mistaken views. And we, those of us who love the university, will have to live with the consequences of their decisions.

We who represent the university to the wider community must do a better job. We must convey to the world that Saint Mary's, and the institution of the university itself, is a place of education where intellectuals study and think for the sake of studying and thinking. The current campaign will end soon. Let us insist that the next ad campaign is all about what goes on at Saint Mary's and why what goes on here is special all on its own.

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