

## **The ethos of a university**

The Cranky Professor

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Because you judge it better that we at Saint Mary's be free to post vile pictures or messages on our office doors than that we not be free to post them, you refrain from seeking to get an authority to remove the pornographic photos I've posted on my door. But ought you to judge it better that we are free to insult and offend and degrade than that we are not free?

You agree that it's good that people are free to express what they want how they want, and yet at the same time you recognize that what a person expresses can put at risk other things that we hold dear. Perhaps restrictions on expression are necessary if we are to enjoy or promote these other things.

The photo I've posted on my door offends and angers people. Not only do none of us like feeling offended or angry, but feeling offended or angry also prevents us, both professors and students, from pursuing our work as well as we might. Its presence robs some of us of the sense of safety we need to function at our best. The photo can properly be interpreted as endorsing or celebrating the sexual objectification of women by men or endorsing or celebrating violence against women—that is why it is vile. As such its effect might be to promote in men objectifying or vicious attitudes toward women or to promote in women silence or acceptance in the face of oppression. All of this is excellent reason for your demanding that I remove the photo.

Moreover, you have discovered that I have no good reason for keeping the photo on my door. You have explained to me and to the university community why the photo ought to come down and I have neither criticised your explanation cogently nor taken the photo down. Either I realize that I should remove the photo but yet leave it on my door out of a misguided desire to go down swinging or because I'm a vile and hateful little man. One way or the other, then, my actions manifest disrespect towards all members of the university community. Whether I acted responsibly or not in originally posting the photo, I'm certainly now acting at the limit of irresponsibility as a teacher and researcher in refusing to remove it. No doubt I'm bringing shame on my department and on Saint Mary's.

Since you judge it better that authority not exercise its prerogative to remove the photo (assuming that some authority possesses that prerogative), you must hold that something very significant would be lost were the photos removed against my will. What could that be? It could be nothing less than the point or purpose or ethos of the university itself.

We might think that we should be free to post what we want because it is the university's mission to promote research, the dissemination of research, and teaching. Research, dissemination

of research, and teaching require that professors be free to use their own judgement. But that's not true—I mean the “require” part. Leaving professors free could well be one effective way to promote these ends, but it is not the only effective way. A university could declare it out-of-bounds to endorse certain opinions or to disseminate one's opinions or to teach in certain ways without compromising research, dissemination, or teaching.

No, our preference for tolerating a vile posting over having authorities remove vile postings cannot be based, at least not entirely, on our concern for research, dissemination of research, and teaching. It lies instead in our conception of ourselves as intellectuals in a community of intellectuals. Central to our conception of ourselves is the idea that we will follow the argument wherever it goes, without submitting to pressure from sources outside the argument itself. A corollary of this is that we will refrain from pressuring others in our community to divert from the path of the arguments they follow. It is worse, for us, that someone comes to the right conclusions through pressure than that they freely come to the wrong conclusions. For us, then, were we to demand of an authority that that authority remove the photo, we would be treating the person who posted the photo disrespectfully. And not only him, but all members of our community. Yes, he is treating us disrespectfully—but that is no reason for us to treat him in kind.

It's all fine and good, someone might say, for a professor to take the high road and not appeal to the Academic Vice-President or the Human Rights Commission to correct this wrong. We students are in a different boat. We cannot learn when we do not feel safe and comfortable and valued, and the presence of this photo on Mercer's door both threatens us and tells us we've been abandoned.

One of the most serious responsibilities a professor has is to help her students to become intellectuals, to find a place within the community of intellectuals that the university aspires to be. Part of that responsibility consists in showing novices how to react to disrespectful treatment. Another part consists in assisting students to feel safe when confronted by vile ideas or images. If professors succeed at their jobs, then nothing I might put on my door could harm a student; it might insult or offend, but it wouldn't harm, even were it intended to harm. Now professors are not going entirely to succeed at this job, no more than they will entirely succeed at any of their other jobs. But that we will almost certainly fail now and again to help a teenager become the thick-skinned, emotionally resilient intellectual she could be does not mean we should want instead to coddle our students and, thereby, to allow them to graduate with all the fears and vulnerabilities they had when they first arrived.

You yourself, we've said, do not seek to have an authority remove the photo from my door, for you aspire to be an intellectual and you value dearly the ethos of a university. You recognize that bad as the situation is with that photo on my door, to demand of an authority that it be removed would be to trespass against that ethos. Of course, that's just you. Not everybody cares to be an intellectual in a community of intellectuals.