

Letter to Senate

The Cranky Professor

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What follows is a letter I recently sent to members of this year's Senate at Saint Mary's.

I am writing to you in your capacity as a member of the Academic Senate. I want to draw to your attention to two matters I believe fall within Senate's concern. One has to do with statements in the Academic Calendar asserting that Saint Mary's is a religious university; the other has to do with the status of the Instructor and Course Evaluation form as the sole official instrument on campus by which students evaluate their professors and courses.

1) The "General Information" section of the Academic Calendar states the four objectives of the university as given in the Saint Mary's University Act of 1970. One of the objectives is to "give special emphasis to the Christian tradition and values in higher education." This objective should be deleted from the Calendar.

First, it's simply false that we at Saint Mary's give special or any emphasis to the Christian tradition, at least as we understand that tradition. Most of us are simply indifferent as to whether our teaching or research is within any Christian tradition or embodies any values Christians honour.

That it's false that we give special emphasis to Christianity is sufficient reason to remove the statement of that objective from our Calendar. But there is a second, practical, reason for deleting it from the Calendar. Its presence in the Calendar is misleading. Students and prospective students will read it as a true declaration of an actual objective of our institution, as well they should. Those who wish to attend a university with a religious objective will be attracted to Saint Mary's and might well be disappointed when they find that religion is merely a lingering rather than a real presence here. Those who are put off by religion will avoid Saint Mary's.

The Calendar makes other false assertions about religion at Saint Mary's. "Because of its traditional commitment to Christian education, Saint Mary's University continues to emphasize personal and social values derived from the experience of Christian civilization." This is from the "Chaplaincy" heading under Student Services, and it ought to be removed as false and misleading.

2) Senate erred in 2005 when it approved the Instructor and Course Evaluation form for use at Saint Mary's. The error doesn't have to do with problems in the ICE form itself, though it is a terrible form reflecting a poor philosophy of university teaching. The error is in Saint Mary's having any single official form at all. Any particular form will privilege certain teaching

goals and teaching styles over others. Having a single official form for the university makes the goals and styles valued by the form the university's official goals and styles. We ought not have an official teaching philosophy at Saint Mary's, and we certainly shouldn't encourage our students to suppose that we do.

Senate ought to declare that any evaluation form a professor at Saint Mary's uses is an official evaluation form. And Senate should make it widely known that professors may use whatever form they want. Saint Mary's would, thereby, acknowledge its pluralism with regard to teaching goals and styles. The university would also be helping to prevent our students from forming bad ideas regarding university teaching.

Senate could, of course, continue to sponsor the administering of the ICE form, but why would it want to?

Thank you very much for your consideration of these matters. All the best for a successful school year.