

Making Saint Mary's a safe place for discussion and debate

The Cranky Professor

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Saint Mary's University mishandled badly the disruption of Jose Ruba's talk. Further, in the days following, it failed to respond adequately both to the fact that a campus presentation had been disrupted and to its own earlier errors.

Now Saint Mary's faces the challenge of making our campus a safe place for discussion and debate. Will it meet that challenge? Experience cautions us not to be optimistic, but nonetheless we must try to steer it in the right direction. We must at least try to prevent our university from again stumbling and falling.

As soon as Security at Saint Mary's realized that it could not by itself halt the disruption, Security should have interrupted the presentation, called the police, and then waited for the police to arrive. With officers on the scene, the presentation could resume, leaving the police to deal with anyone who disrupted it. The university mishandled the disruption both by failing to call the police immediately and, after the police arrived, by requesting that the presentation be moved. The university should have humoured any protesters willing to be hauled away or arrested.

The Friday or Monday right after the disruption—that is, as soon as the administration became aware of what had happened Thursday evening—Colin Dodds, on behalf of Saint Mary's, should have invited Jose Ruba back to campus to give his presentation. This would have made amends to the campus group that organized his visit and to the people who came to hear what Mr Ruba had to say. It would also have sent an unmistakable signal to the disrupting protesters that despite their efforts, Saint Mary's is a safe place for discussion and debate. They would have known right away that though they won a skirmish, they had lost the war. (It's not too late for President Dodds to invite Mr Ruba back. Why our president is acting weakly remains a mystery.)

The Friday or Monday right after the disruption, Saint Mary's should have issued a strong memo to the university community that condemned the disruption, expressed its regret at mishandling it, and affirmed that it has learned from its errors. Instead, we got a mealy-mouthed press release that claimed that moving the talk was a victory over the disrupting protesters, that didn't condemn the disruption, and that, in speaking about balancing open debate against the rights of the community, both endorsed an absurdity (that speech can violate a person's rights) and put a sheen of respectability on the disruption. Later comments by our vice-president external, Chuck Bridges, were equally obnoxious.

That's the past, though. What can we do for the present and the future? To begin with, what likely further missteps do we have to try to prevent?

We have to try to prevent Saint Mary's from instituting a vetting system for campus events. The university might now decide to look over proposals and to decline those it deems controversial or liable to offend people. Or, out of a misguided concern for fairness or balance, the university might institute policies regarding the format of campus events. We have to do our best to stop any such initiatives.

We have to insist that the university, and all university groups, not engage in self-censorship. We must not fear protests or human rights complaints. We have to ensure that Saint Mary's not give in to bullies who would threaten to bring it before a human rights commission.

We have to guard against our university's tendency to think in terms of conflict resolution. There is no conflict here to resolve. What is at stake is the integrity of our institution as a university. If through safeguarding our mission some members of the Saint Mary's community come to feel their needs are going unmet, well, that's too bad.

Strangely, one thing we need is an explicitly formulated policy for handling a disruption, one Security can consult and easily apply. (Strangely, because one would have thought Security wouldn't have had any trouble figuring out what to do.) Here's my draft of such a policy:

- 1) All members of the university community are encouraged to organize presentations, lectures, discussions, and debates on campus, in whatever format they choose.

- 2) Security at a campus event is charged with ensuring people's physical safety, the security of buildings and property, and the integrity of the event.

- 3) All people will obey directives from Security or face discipline. For students, discipline might include suspension; for guests of the university, discipline might include being barred from university property.

- 4) If a person disrupting a campus event does not comply with a directive from Security, Security will immediately summon the police.

- 5) Should Security summon the police, Security will halt the event until police arrive or the disrupter has left the area. While the event is halted, speakers and other participants will rest comfortably in a room away from the event.

- 6) Once the police have arrived, the event will continue. The police will deal with any disruption as they see fit.

- 7) Members of the university community can rest assured that campus events will not be relocated, rescheduled, or cancelled as a result of disruption.