

A good place at which to learn

The Cranky Professor

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To what should students of a university be entitled just by virtue of their being students of a university? That is, what rights should students possess given both what university is all about and the place of students within the university community?

Well, different universities can be all about different things. Trinity Western University, for instance, is about creating good Christians; the University of British Columbia isn't. (Saint Mary's is deeply confused on this particular matter.) What rights a student should have depends to a large extent on what his or her particular university is all about.

Central among what I would like Saint Mary's to be all about are research, teaching and learning, and intellectual community. So, if it were up to me, students at Saint Mary's would be entitled to that which is necessary or useful: 1) for acquiring the skills and understandings of an intellectual, including, of course, the skills and understandings of a researcher in their disciplines of choice; and 2) for living as an (aspiring) intellectual within a community of intellectuals.

My list of rights for students at Saint Mary's, then, would include the following:

- the right to study in any programme in which the student is qualified on academic grounds alone to study
- the right to have competent teachers and to have her work evaluated on academic grounds alone
- the right to hear from her teacher why he criticized or evaluated her work as he did
- the right to use the library and any other campus facility necessary or useful to her studies, to have adequate and comfortable study space, and to have adequate and comfortable classrooms
- the right to express herself freely, both inside and outside the classroom (this includes the right to speak ill of her university, her teachers, her classmates, and the right to say what offends or hurts others)
- the right to associate with whom she wishes, including the right to invite visiting speakers to campus
- the right to attend classes and campus events free from disruption

The last three items on this list, those concerning freedom of expression and association and freedom from disruption, are the ones we see most often abridged or violated at Saint Mary's.

Now any two of these rights might conflict with each other in some particular context. One student's right to speak his mind might compromise another student's right to attend a class free of disruption. Despite this possibility, conflicts among these entitlements are actually quite rare. When someone disrupts a class or other event, the disruption typically involves the volume, manner, or length of time that that person has chosen to use to express himself, not the content of his expression.

One or another of these rights might, though, often conflict with the customs or expectations people bring onto campus from other areas of their lives. Customs or rights that serve to smooth social interactions in the workplace, for instance, can prevent intellectuals from going about their business.

I mean nothing grand when I call these items "rights," nothing beyond that they should be respected and protected. That is, if the items I've listed are indeed necessary or useful to the proper functioning of Saint Mary's as an institution of learning and a community of intellectuals, then Saint Mary's should have in place mechanisms to protect them and to repair things should one be violated. Students who believe one of their rights has been violated or is under threat should be able to launch a complaint and have that complaint evaluated quickly and properly.

Yet the best safeguard these rights could know is the university's own informal, day-to-day institutional culture. When administrators and professors are keen to respect students' rights simply out of their dedication to educating students and to creating and maintaining a community of intellectuals, then students' rights are not at risk at all. When concerns other than creating and maintaining a community of intellectuals motivate administrators and professors, though, students' rights—and, thereby, the ability of students to learn and to participate in intellectual culture—can easily come to grief, no matter what fine sentences the university's Calendar or other official documents might contain.