

Campus culture

The Cranky Professor

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Congratulations and welcome to David Gauthier, our new Vice-President, Academic and Research!

By virtue of being our academic vice president, Dr Gauthier is responsible for the culture of our campus, for the tone of life at Saint Mary's.

Of course, Dr Gauthier's responsibility for campus culture is largely informal and it is certainly not uniquely his. We all have a role to play. Yet Dr Gauthier's attitudes and commitments, and his responses to campus goings-on, will have a substantial effect on the nature of community of Saint Mary's. His decisions will help to determine whether our university is a community of intellectuals or something else.

Whether campus culture at Saint Mary's is open and dynamic, marked by freedom of expression and other civil liberties, is to a great extent within his power, as is whether our administration remains closed and disinclined to explain its decisions or respond to criticism of them.

If he is to contribute to refashioning Saint Mary's as a place of intellectual community, Dr Gauthier must be whole-heartedly committed to academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus. He must be willing and eager to stand for professors, students, and any other members of the university community who say or do unpopular or offensive things.

There are various constituencies on campus that do not value freedom of expression and the other civil liberties. People from these constituencies have been remarkably successful in bending campus culture their way. Dr Gauthier must be firm in the face of pressure from organized groups or individuals to institute rules about who may and may not appear on campus, about which student groups receive society status from the students' association, and about how professors, students, or guests may or may not meet with each other or present their views.

Dr Gauthier must be willing to ensure the integrity of campus events. He needs to give security staff strong and clear instructions regarding how to handle disruptive protests. If the police need to carry off disruptive protesters to enable a campus event to continue, he should be willing to let them do so.

Dr Gauthier needs to be candid and direct about the values for which the university stands, and willing to engage in critical discussion to explain and defend them in face of those who advocate controls on what is said on campus.

Dr Gauthier needs to ensure that the university confronts its failings and mistakes honestly. Remember the press release the university issued after disruptive protesters forced a speaker off campus? It dealt in obfuscations and half-truths, it claimed that security and the university acted well, it failed to condemn the disruption, it suggested that shouting down offensive speakers is a noble form of political action. To make Saint Mary's the kind of university it should be, Dr Gauthier must require the university always evaluates its performance from the perspective of academic and intellectual values first, and that what the university puts on its official stationery is honest and complete.

Dr Gauthier must stand against conformity in teaching standards and practices. As part of this, he should work to make it that Saint Mary's has no official teaching evaluation form. He should also be concerned about the difficulties professors who don't use much technology are having finding hospitable classrooms.

Finally, Dr Gauthier, if he is to help in the project of creating intellectual community at Saint Mary's, must align himself publicly with the movement to sever Saint Mary's official ties to religion. To take a good first step in this direction, he should see that the Academic Calendar no longer states that Saint Mary's is in the Christian tradition of higher education.

The fact that our Calendar quotes the "Christian tradition" passage of the Saint Mary's University Act, 1970, brings together many of the points I've made above.

For one, to be within the Christian tradition in higher education is to be outside the academic tradition, for the latter is the tradition in which individual scholars and researchers are free to choose whichever creeds they will, and to reject creeds entirely. For another, to include that passage is to be dishonest, in fact it is to lie, for we at Saint Mary's do not give special emphasis to the Christian tradition and those responsible for the Calendar know that we do not. That passage in the Calendar, to sum up, is a piece of mendacity that places non-academic values above academic ones.

I hope Dr Gauthier doesn't have the sense that he has his work cut out for him. There is much to do to reform and improve campus culture, certainly, but Saint Mary's has resources equal to the task. And while Dr Gauthier must be a significant player in this project, he can count on much support from students, professors, and others at our university.