

Why Carleton should change its policy regarding demonstrations

The Cranky Professor

The Journal, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, 10 – 16 November 2010

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Carleton University, in Ottawa, will deny space in public areas to disturbing, upsetting, or offensive demonstrations. Carleton will, nevertheless, provide space for such demonstrations, just not in a location where people can't easily avoid them.

Early last October, Carleton denied use of the quad, a central public area on campus, to pro-life demonstrators who intended to show large pictures of aborted fetuses and concentration camp inmates. The university invited the demonstrators to set up their display in a particular room so that people wouldn't have to see the pictures. Demonstrators were allowed to stand in the quad to direct people to their display, but they were forbidden to erect their display there.

When the demonstrators ignored the university's invitation and attempted to set up their display in the quad, officers of the university had them arrested for trespassing.

Roseann O'Reilly Runte, the President and Vice-Chancellor of Carleton, thinks Carleton's policy regarding disturbing demonstrations gives everybody everything they should want. No one is prohibited from saying what they want to say or how they want to say it, while at the same time no one is required to hear or see what they would rather avoid.

Whatever President Runte thinks, Carleton's policy is entirely contrary to what a university is all about. It prevents Carleton from being what it should be. Carleton should not patrol demonstrations for either their content or how they present that content.

President Runte's central mistake is to think of the Carleton campus as a place where different sorts of people cross paths as they pursue their various projects, as though the quad were a downtown city street. She should, instead, conceive of the campus as a place where a very particular, very special sort of community lives. A university campus is, first of all, or at least it should be, a home for university people, a home for intellectuals. Policies at a university should be designed and implemented with that fact or ideal in mind. A campus is not a city street welcoming to all, but a place entirely at the service of university people. Any accommodation with the needs or desires of people who are not university people is a betrayal of the university.

University people want above all not just to believe truly and to value nobly, but to believe and value what they do for the right reason. They would rather they believed something false on what they take to be good reasons than to believe something true because, out of fear or hope, they desire it to be true. Their respect for other university people is manifested in their refusal to seek to get others to believe a thing, even

something they themselves maintain to be true and important, on anything other than good reasons.

Being a university person requires always being ready to have one's beliefs and values challenged. An intellectual always leaves her position open to attack, her values at risk. If she is wrong about something, she wants to know, and so she invites anyone at all to show her where and how she is wrong.

For this reason, an intellectual, a university person, would never turn a demonstrator away from a public venue at her university, especially if that demonstrator intends to challenge her deeply held beliefs or values. No university person seeks to avoid a demonstration, and none needs protection from whatever the demonstration advocates or how it advocates it.

Carleton's policy on demonstrations, then, makes Carleton less of a home to intellectuals, to university people, than a university should be. And because it molycoddles the students—people who are on campus because they aspire to be intellectuals—it undercuts the educative mission of the university.

Everyone who steps onto a university campus risks being disturbed or upset, or at least that is how it should be. Moreover, only those people keen to risk being disturbed or upset belong on a university campus. University people at Carleton should be outraged by how their president has treated them, by her contempt for their values.

By the way, while an intellectual might occasionally be disturbed, upset, or, even, outraged by something, she is never offended. Those people who would have been offended by gory images or an anti-woman message are to be pitied (and then educated). They are not to be indulged, especially not at the cost of corrupting a university.