

Memos we desperately need to receive (but probably won't)

The Cranky Professor
The Journal, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, 19 - 25 January 2011

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MEMO

To: The Saint Mary's University Community
From: Colin Dodds, President, Saint Mary's University

Re: SMUSA's interference with students attempting to express their views

On 30 November last year, students associated with a campus society were ordered by Matt Anderson, president of the Saint Mary's University Students' Association (SMUSA), to remove a sign included in a display they had erected in the foyer of the Loyola Building.

Saint Mary's University deeply regrets this interference with the peaceful and orderly expression of opinion. Saint Mary's is dedicated to maintaining an environment that encourages freedom of thought, expression and discussion. Part of the reason university people value freedom of expression so highly is that through open discussion and debate false or pernicious views can be exposed as such. The main reason, though, is that a commitment to freedom of expression is essential to our existence as intellectuals in intellectual community. We are passionate about making up our minds for ourselves and about enabling others to make up their minds for themselves.

That the sign offended and hurt some students gave Mr Anderson no reason at all to order it removed. Students who objected to the message the group sought to convey were free to engage in discussion about it and to explain why that message is false or pernicious. They were free to set up their own counter display.

In acceding to the demand that the sign be removed, Mr Anderson served poorly those students who objected to it. Mr Anderson mollycoddled these students, thereby treating them as emotionally immature and, moreover, interfering with their emotional and intellectual growth. He also made it more likely that others on campus will pester authorities to shut up those with whom they disagree.

I have spoken with Mr Anderson about his actions and I believe he understands the many ways in which they have compromised the integrity of campus culture at Saint Mary's and harmed the

people he sought to aid. I am pleased to be able to say that I am confident the current SMUSA will not again prevent students or others from saying what they want.

To ensure that future SMUSA administrations do not repeat Mr Anderson's mistakes, SMUSA needs to reform its constitution so that its officers no longer have the power to vet or censor messages contained in student society displays or other communications. I am delighted that constitutional reform has already appeared on SMUSA's agenda.

The administration at Saint Mary's, for its part, is currently developing a system whereby the university itself can sponsor student societies and supply them with what they need to operate successfully. In the future, should SMUSA wrongly interfere with a student society, that society will be able to apply to the university for sponsorship, knowing that the university values freedom of expression and discussion.

The administration is also reviewing the relationship between SMUSA and Saint Mary's. The administration is not looking to increase its control of the students' association. It is concerned, though, to have in place mechanisms by which SMUSA can be shut down and its functions transferred to student services should future student associations threaten the values of our community.

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MEMO

To: The Saint Mary's University community

From: Matt Anderson, President, Saint Mary's University Students' Association

Re: My recent interference with students attempting to express their views

On 30 November last year, I ordered students who had set up a display in the Loyola Building to remove one of their signs.

I was wrong to have done so. I apologize. I apologize to the students to whom I issued my order, to the students who demanded that the sign be removed, and to the university community as a whole.

To the students who had set up the display, I apologize for interfering with the peaceful and orderly expression of your claims and views. Now, I continue to believe that the message you posted is false and pernicious, and I sympathize with those offended and hurt by it, but after speaking with Saint Mary's University president Colin Dodds and others, and after much hard thought, I accept that we all must be able to speak falsely and to advocate the harmful without interference. This is especially true on a university campus.

SMUSA invites your society to mount its display again, in the same location, so that you may express in it whatever claims and opinions you wish.

To the students who demanded that the sign be removed, I apologize for treating you as other than competent intellectuals. You are not people who need to be protected from claims and opinions. I am sorry for the disrespect for you inherent in my actions and I regret that I deprived you of an opportunity for emotional and intellectual growth.

When we disagree with a message, even if we are hurt or offended by it, we must respond by discussing and criticizing that message, not by seeking to suppress it. Yes, life is hard, but let's not feign to be so delicate.

To members of the university community generally, I apologize for compromising the integrity of campus culture. Saint Mary's aspires to be a place marked by the vigorous and free expression and exchange of claims, ideas, proposals, and visions. SMUSA should be in the business of protecting and extending intellectual culture, and not acting in ways that thwart it.

I regret that my actions might well have made it more likely that other people on campus will seek to suppress opinions they reject rather than to discuss and debate them. This would be sad, for right now Saint Mary's is attempting to overcome its history of hostility toward freedom of expression. I fear I might have set that process back. With this memo, I hope to help put things right.

While I was wrong to have ordered the sign removed, technically I was in within my rights to do so, at least on the interpretation of the SMUSA constitution under which I acted. (I am no longer sure that that interpretation is accurate, though.) Because no SMUSA officer should have the power to interfere with the peaceful and orderly expression of opinion or emotion on campus, SMUSA is currently consulting with the university community on rewriting the SMUSA constitution to make it clear that SMUSA may not vet or censor the messages student societies wish to convey.

While I appreciate President Dodds's concern to create mechanisms by which the university administration can serve student societies abused by future SMUSAs and protect campus culture, I want to assure him and the university community that these efforts are unnecessary. A new spirit is alive at SMUSA and the organization is committed to reforming itself so that it will never be other than an active promoter of an open and free campus culture.

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[Postscript April 2011: No, we at Saint Mary's received neither of these memos. Quite the contrary. Anderson continues to think he did well to interfere in the peaceful expression of opinion and Gauthier, in reacting slowly and ineptly, set a terrible precedent for the future.]

—30 (the real one)—