

My meeting with David Gauthier

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Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary’s University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(902) 420-5825
mark.mercer@smu.ca

I met with David Gauthier, the new Vice President, Academic and Research, of Saint Mary’s, on Thursday 10 February. I wanted to ask him about his response to a case of interference with the peaceful and orderly expression of opinion on campus.

Some background: On Tuesday 30 November 2010, Saint Mary’s University Students’ Association (SMUSA) president Matt Anderson, having received complaints from some students, ordered members of a campus society, Students for Life, to remove from their display in the Loyola Building a sign that read “Women Do Regret Abortion.” The people at the display complied.

Though he heard about this incident no more than ten days later, almost two months passed before Dr Gauthier sent a memo to SMUSA about it.

Not only was this memo long in coming, but it failed even to express disapproval of Mr Anderson’s action. Moreover, it neither explained the value of freedom of expression nor celebrated it; in fact, it contained passages drawn from a university document about limiting expression on campus.

In the end, all the memo did was to order SMUSA to consult with the administration should it again consider interfering with expression on campus. At least that’s what its words say. Dr Gauthier told me, though, that he intended by the memo to order SMUSA not to interfere with expression. SMUSA is to leave that up to the administration. Dr Gauthier said he later conveyed this order to Mr Anderson orally. (Mr Anderson has told me that SMUSA will ignore it.)

Dr Gauthier said in our conversation that members of Students for Life are free to put up their display again, complete with the offending sign. The university will not order them to remove it, and they may disregard SMUSA requests. Dr Gauthier has not, however, said this to Students for Life. He didn’t tell me what the university would do for Students for Life should SMUSA retaliate by revoking its status as a student society.

Part of what makes Dr Gauthier’s response inept is the language he chose to use. The memo contained all the phrases that those opposed to freedom of expression enjoy hearing: “harassment,” “discrimination,” “tolerance,” “mutual respect,” “limits to freedom of expression,” “harmful to individuals or groups,” and the wonderful, Orwellian “rigorous and respectful discourse within the context of legitimate areas of academic enquiry as defined by the academic community.”

Dr Gauthier included sentences containing these phrases even though he seems to be aware that Mr Anderson claims to have ordered the sign down not because students were

(merely) offended or uncomfortable; Dr Gauthier seems to be aware that Mr Anderson claims, rather, to have ordered it down because seeing it harmed some students psychologically and threatened significant harm to others (what if a young woman contemplating having an abortion had seen it?). Mr Anderson could properly find in Dr Gauthier's memo grounds for thinking he acted well.

A strong response would have included at least these items: 1) a memo to the university community (not just to SMUSA) expressing disapproval of Mr Anderson's action, explaining the importance of freedom of expression to academic community, and assuring students that the university will support any student society with which SMUSA interferes; 2) a direct invitation to Students for Life to remount their display.

I asked Dr Gauthier whether he declined to take a strong stance out of concern either not to shame Mr Anderson or SMUSA publicly or to avoid doing something inflammatory. He shook his head "no" to each suggestion.

So why didn't Dr Gauthier respond well to Mr Anderson's interference with the peaceful expression of opinion on campus? As far as I can tell from our conversation, it is because he thinks he presently lacks the proper authority to do so. He says that there is currently no official university written policy on freedom of expression on campus. Until he has such a policy in hand, his interventions cannot but be ad hoc, he says.

Yet a weak intervention of the sort he made is still an intervention and, thus, on his criteria, still ad hoc. Why prefer a weak ad hoc intervention to a strong ad hoc intervention? Also puzzling is the status of the document Dr Gauthier reproduced in his memo. Doesn't it state an official university policy on expression on campus?

Dr Gauthier a few times during our meeting made the point that students, professors, and administrators across Canada are these days often infringing on people's freedom of expression and many of them are working hard to place restrictions on expression. He said that he anticipates similar troubles at Saint Mary's. He wants to be armed with an explicit policy when they come along.

Dr Gauthier is hoping to have a colloquium on freedom of expression on campus. Sadly, none of the three groups Dr Gauthier wishes to see involved in organizing the colloquium—the office of the vice president academic, the faculty union, and the students' association—has distinguished itself as a champion of freedom of expression. Still, there's nothing at all wrong with people getting together to talk about important things, so I wish this project well.

Dr Gauthier seems to want this colloquium to be a part, though an informal part, of the process of developing a policy on freedom of expression on campus. It wasn't clear to me what Dr Gauthier has in mind here, though. My fear is that Dr Gauthier will use the colloquium to gauge which way the wind is blowing at Saint Mary's, at least among those members of our community who have influence or power. That might lead him and other senior administrators to fashion a policy that embodies the values and priorities of people hostile to freedom of expression on campus. That would mean that freedom of expression on campus will have even fewer protections than it has currently.

Matt Anderson's action was the first test our new vice president academic faced of his commitment to create and nurture a free and open campus culture. David Gauthier failed this test badly.