

## Rejuvenating our academic senate

The Cranky Professor

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The administration at Saint Mary's has its concerns, priorities, and values; the faculty union has its. So, also, does our students' association, as does the union for part-time professors. We might mention even our board of governors.

The administration is concerned that Saint Mary's collect enough money to pay the bills so that the place stays open. Its decisions are informed by that concern (more or less; noise from other sources—personal ambition, social ideals, whatever—sometimes affects things). The unions are concerned that professors and librarians make a good wage and enjoy job security and good working conditions. The students' association is concerned with student life and with representing student interests to governments, the administration, and professors.

Who, though, is concerned with Saint Mary's as a place of research, teaching, and learning, and as a community of intellectuals? That is, whose values are academic values, whose priorities are academic priorities?

The professors, of course. (Or, at least, so one hopes.)

Do the professors have a vehicle through which to influence what happens at Saint Mary's, so that research, teaching, learning, and intellectual community might find nurture and protection, and be central to life here? If professors lack a vehicle, then they and their students live as academics just in whatever small areas, if any, the actual powers at Saint Mary's have set aside for them.

One might respond that professors are well represented and quite active within the powers-that-be at Saint Mary's. Our president and vice-president academic are academics, and, indeed, have backgrounds in arts and science. (Colin Dodds, our president, studied classics; David Gauthier, our vice-president academic, is an academic geographer.) Our various deans are all academics. As well, the two faculty unions have plenty of professors on their executives, and professors and librarians make up their membership.

The point is true and important. Things would be a lot worse at Saint Mary's, and at Canadian universities generally, were fewer academics in leading roles in administrations and unions. (The trend away from professors in administration is certainly troubling.) But it's not enough.

It's not enough because academics in administration and unions are wearing two hats, and their allegiances can conflict. Serving Saint Mary's as a place of research, teaching, learning, and intellectual community might conflict with administrative or union goals. For instance, though inconsistent with intellectual community, the idea of the safe university, a university with rules in place to prevent people from being exposed to that which offends or

upsets them, is useful to administrators who need to placate students or to keep human rights commissioners happy.

Another response to the question whether professors have a vehicle through which to pursue and protect academic values is that yes, they do. They have the academic senate.

This would be a terrific answer, except that academic senates aren't really up for the job.

A variety of factors explain why the academic senate at Saint Mary's isn't up for the job, factors that no doubt are in play at universities across the country.

One important factor here at Saint Mary's is that only half of our academic senate is professors. The other half is mainly administrators and students. Only half of the people on senate, then, are wearing just the one hat, the research-teaching-learning-intellectual community hat.

Another important factor is that our senate has no tradition of seeing itself as the active protector of academic values, especially not of intellectual community, on campus. Individual professors who sit on senate rarely take on as part of their job the role of guardian of campus culture. This is understandable; a senator's tasks are time consuming enough. Still, it is unfortunate.

Finally, much of what happens at Saint Mary's, both good and bad, goes unreported. Rarely are the professors who serve on senate, or any of us, on top of current happenings. *The Journal* does its bit, of course, yet, for whatever reasons, *The Journal* does not much cover campus events or issues on campus. And there's really no other medium of news or discussion here.

Can this change? Could our academic senate become a loud and effective voice for academic concerns, priorities, and values? Well, why not?

Such institutional reforms as restricting the vote to professors will take a while to achieve, certainly. But institutional reform, though ultimately necessary, must follow changes in how the professors who sit on senate understand their job and their responsibilities and what the rest of us expect of them. There's nothing to stop individual professors on senate from making campus culture at Saint Mary's part of their business.

Right now, Saint Mary's is in the process of revising and renewing its academic plan. A central flaw in the current plan is that it skimps on academic values. It's all about a just and civil society, environmental responsibility, community concerns, and the like. Noble stuff, of course, but the values here are not academic values. The danger of affirming non-academic values in an academic plan is that serving them will push aside what we need for research, teaching, learning, and intellectual culture.

Professors on academic senate should speak loudly for an academic plan that puts academic values at the centre of what we do at Saint Mary's. They should do so self-consciously as senators, as representatives of the professoriate. It would be great were their doing so part of a rejuvenation of academic senates, and academic values, across Canada.