

Making Saint Mary's safe for expression and discussion

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That the current students' association at Saint Mary's turned out to be hostile to freedom of expression on campus took no one by surprise. After all, previous Saint Mary's students' associations have joyfully been on the side of restricting and suppressing expression. A few years ago, the association supported orders to remove cartoons from a professor's office door. Once it banned a campaign poster by a student hoping to be its president.

As well, students' associations across Canada have been tripping over themselves to outlaw whatever falls beyond a very small pale. Indeed, not long ago the students' union at Dalhousie debated whether student societies should be able to express opposition to this or that. The campus atheist society may advocate atheism, but should it be allowed to speak against religion?

What really puts student politicians into high gear, of course, is the pro-life stance toward abortion. And so it was bound to happen sooner or later that the Saint Mary's pro-life student society would find itself on the receiving end of a students' association gag order.

On 30 November last year, pro-life students manning an authorized display on campus were ordered by Saint Mary's University Students' Association (SMUSA) president Matt Anderson to remove one of their signs. The sign read "Women *Do* Regret Abortion." Students claiming to be hurt and offended by it complained to SMUSA. Mr Anderson had the sign removed, he explains in a letter to the campus newspaper, in order to "maximize the positive university experience" and to help students overcome "challenges they may face."

Mr Anderson interpreted the sign to say or imply that all women who have chosen to have an abortion eventually regret their decision. Because, according to Mr Anderson, that claim is false as well as offensive and hurtful, he did the right thing in ordering the sign removed. Of course, it doesn't matter what the sign said. It might as well have read "All women who have abortions are child murderers (and let's restore capital punishment)." By ordering the sign removed, Mr Anderson wilfully interfered with the peaceful and orderly expression of claims and opinions.

Why was it wrong for him to do this? First, a university campus should be a place that encourages people to exchange claims and opinions, for university people want to live in intellectual community and central to intellectual community is being able to examine issues from all sides and make up one's mind for oneself. We want to live in such a way that our beliefs and values respond only to the pressure of evidence and argument. That is the type of people we are.

By his actions, Mr Anderson not only expressed disdain for our way of life. He actively interfered with our living it.

Second, Mr Anderson treated the students at the table badly, as one always does when one prevents another from speaking her mind.

Third, Mr Anderson molycoddled the students who complained about the sign. Rather than instruct them how to deal properly with views that upset them, Mr Anderson treated them as emotionally and intellectually incompetent and fragile, in need of protection from mere words. They should feel insulted. As well, since a central task of a university is to create emotionally and intellectually mature people, Mr Anderson came between the students who sought to have the sign removed and their education.

Again, that SMUSA is hostile to ideals of university life is not surprising. What is a bit surprising, though, and very much more dispiriting, is that the administration at Saint Mary's, and maybe a good section of the professoriate, as well, doesn't much care.

A month and a half after the incident, neither the president of Saint Mary's nor any other official has yet condemned Mr Anderson's actions. No official has publicly said anything at all about them. For their part, professors don't seem to be pressing Saint Mary's to condemn this act of censorship and to explain why it was wrong, or to prevent something like this from happening again.

Mr Anderson claims that as SMUSA president, he is authorized by SMUSA's constitution to vet and censor messages student societies wish to communicate. Maybe he is. If he is, Saint Mary's must encourage student politicians to change their constitution so that SMUSA officials may no longer harm campus culture.

Mr Anderson also claims that Saint Mary's has no authority over the independently incorporated SMUSA to force it to behave itself. That might be true; it might even be how it should be. But then the Saint Mary's administration needs to create a system whereby students can organize themselves into societies outside the reach of SMUSA, where they will be free to say what they want. It also makes imperative that the university have in place mechanisms for denying SMUSA what it needs to live should it again prove itself a threat to campus culture. Student Services can easily take over its functions.

Matt Anderson is a student, and students are students. They are going to make all sorts of mistakes. That's all right, for they are here at university to be educated. By failing to correct their mistakes and to have them clean up after themselves, though, university administrators, and the professors who fail to hold administrators' feet to the fire, deny students the education that is their due.

Disdain for freedom of expression and university culture is a serious problem in education in this province and, indeed, throughout this country. The good news is that it is a problem that won't require a cent of taxpayer or student money to fix. The bad news is the sloth, cowardice or connivance of those who should be fixing it.