

## Education or re-education?

The Cranky Professor

*The Journal*, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, 14 March 2012, Issue 7  
On-line at CCEPA blog: <http://www.ccepa.ca/blog/?p=280>; reprinted in the Newsletter of the  
Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, Number 61, April 2012:  
<http://www.safs.ca/nl61.pdf>

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“Queen’s Bands” is the name of the marching band and associated cheerleaders and cavorters at Queen’s University, in Kingston, Ontario.

The Bands performs at campus activities and local and national events. Queen’s Bands has been noted throughout its long history more for spirit and merriment than music—which isn’t to imply that its members aren’t serious musicians in other venues.

The Bands was suspended last November after some of its in-house materials found their way to the office of a university administrator.

As a result of the suspension, Queen’s University cancelled scheduled appearances by the Bands at an alumni dinner and the Kingston Santa Claus parade. The university also required members of the Bands to take Human Rights and Equity training.

The suspension, made jointly by the students’ association at Queen’s, which oversees Queen’s Bands and other student societies, and the university administration, is punishment and warning for the vulgar and sexist songs and writings some members of the Bands had been distributing among themselves. Vice-Provost and Dean of Student Affairs Ann Tierney said that the “materials, and the behaviours they promote, are unacceptable. They point to a sub-culture within the Bands where explicit, disrespectful and degrading language marginalizes community members who may remain silent for fear of exclusion.”

The language Dean Tierney has in mind includes “Mouth raping your little sister since 1905” and “I will rape you with a lamp.”

The suspension is also to affirm that Queen’s University values inclusion and to assure students that the campus is welcoming and safe.

Now if I were a Queen’s University student, I’d transfer out and ask for my money back. This latest episode makes it pretty clear that its administration isn’t much concerned that Queen’s be a place of education.

First of all, to punish people for what they say is to violate their freedom of expression. Freedom of expression should especially be valued on a university campus because it is central to what we are as intellectuals: we are concerned to think and say what we want only for what we judge to be our own good reasons, and not out of fear of official sanction.

In sum, by punishing the members of Bands for what some of them said or sang or wrote, Queen's University is acting against its mission to foster a free and responsible intellectual community.

Of course, the administration and the students' association don't see it that way. They maintain that the behaviour of members of the Bands tends to marginalize and silence people in the Queen's community.

If they are right, though, the behaviour cries out for public discussion, not punishment. That members of the Bands have been singing obnoxious songs among themselves provides Queen's with an opportunity to discuss and debate publicly issues of sexism and the hurtfulness of exclusion.

By opting instead to punish the Bands, Queen's university is failing in its task to educate its students to take their place in a free society. Those students offended or hurt by the fact that Bands had this material have now learned that when one is offended, one should appeal to an authority to deal with the offenders. This lesson is contrary to a university's mission to help students to become critical thinkers and autonomous agents.

The requirement that members of Bands undergo Human Rights training is likewise inconsistent with Queen's status as a university. Rather than simply provide students with opportunities to engage in discussion and argument, which might well result in changed attitudes among members of Bands, Queen's is seeking to re-educate some of its students into the preferred attitudes. They will not learn anything about sexism or exclusion from this training ("learn" in the sense of freely accept on the grounds of reasons), except that saying the wrong thing will get them punished.

Queen's University is engaging in bullying for the sake of anti-bullying and exclusion for the sake of inclusion.

Something similar to the Bands' case happened at Harvard a couple decades ago. It's instructive to contrast the reaction of administrators and student politicians at Queen's to the reaction of administrators there.

In 1992, Dean of Students Archie C. Epps III became troubled by what he perceived as increasing racial tensions among Harvard College students. Among other incidents, someone had hung a Confederate flag in a dorm. (I know of this case from Harry R. Lewis's book *Excellence Without a Soul*, about the continuing decline of commitment by universities to liberal education.)

Epps responded by assigning all incoming students Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance." Epps had students meet with professors in small discussion groups. His goal was to encourage students to understand themselves as individuals rather than to see themselves as particles of an identity group. With luck, he reasoned, students would come to be able to offer and receive ideas and criticism without either hectoring others or taking offence. The key to community cohesion, Epps proposed, was individual self-reliance.

Dean Tierney at Queen's is no Dean Epps.