

Liberal education requires freedom of expression

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Pretty nearly all the students in my second-year philosophy class agreed that the Saint Mary's University Students' Association (SMUSA) should not have banned the gaming society's poster. The poster featured a Nintendo Zapper and was intended to advertise a night at the pub.

I told the class that Michael MacDonell, a SMUSA Vice-President, had justified the decision by explaining that "a picture depicting or making light of gun violence is something that we as an association are not willing to endorse."

The gun, my students replied, was obviously a plastic toy, and couldn't possibly be taken by anyone to be depicting or making light of gun violence.

I told them MacDonell also explained that SMUSA has to ensure that postings don't damage the reputation of Saint Mary's. To this, some of my students responded that it should have been obvious that banning the poster would do far greater damage to our reputation, as indeed it has.

Yet when I asked whether SMUSA should have the power to vet and reject posters, many of my students, maybe the majority, indicated that they thought it should. SMUSA should be able to say no to posters, according to many of them—it just shouldn't say no without a good reason.

The idea my students expressed is not just that people shouldn't put up posters that depict or make light of gun violence, or celebrate sexist attitudes or mock a religion, or question a woman's right to an abortion, or damage the reputation of the university. The idea my students offered is that people shouldn't be allowed to put up posters that do such things. They shouldn't be allowed to put up offensive posters because the campus needs to be a pleasant, hospitable place to everyone. A photograph of a dismembered fetus might upset a young woman who just had an abortion. A drawing of Mohammed will hurt Muslims. Being upset or hurt will affect their studies. The university won't, for them, be a place at which to learn.

Students and professors at Saint Mary's belong to all sorts of cultures, said these students, and they all deserve a respectful atmosphere in which to learn. In order to ensure that they can learn well and take their place in their careers and in society, someone has to oversee campus goings-on, someone with the authority to intervene to prevent students from suffering harm to their sense of self-worth. Otherwise, the university is not equally their university.

I think this view is fundamentally wrong headed. But before I explain why, I want to voice a criticism of it that I think should resonate even with those sympathetic to the pro-censorship view.

The criticism is that we cannot trust that our overseer will use her powers well. In fact, we can be fairly confident that she won't. Give a person who wants it the power to censor things, and she will use it. Soon enough, for no good reason, and in the face of ridicule, the censor will ban Nintendo Zappers from posters. Soon enough, she will censor anything any group on campus doesn't like—out of conviction, out of a desire to be even-handed, or out of cowardice. Soon enough, she will come after your own sincere expressions of opinion or emotion.

This argument has much to recommend it, but I think there's a much stronger one to consider.

The pro-censorship argument notes that people on campus come from all sorts of cultures. That's true. But it's a mistake to infer from that truth that a university campus is a multicultural place. It isn't. A university is as monocultural as any institution could be. University culture is that of intellectuals—of researchers and scholars, interpreters of literature and life, of teachers and learners. Our culture is that of free and fearless inquiry into the ways things are. University culture is welcoming to people of all sorts of backgrounds, yes, but it has its own strong and particular identity.

Central to the identity of intellectuals is the desire not to be swayed, and not to sway others, by anything other than evidence and cogent argument. Not only do we want to have true beliefs and sound values, we want to come to those beliefs and values for our own good reasons, and not as a result of ignorance or pressure.

One of a professor's tasks as a teacher is to help her students to become dispassionate inquirers, to live, that is, as intellectuals. Campus censorship undermines their work. It reinforces in a professor's students the idea that there are some things better not confronted intellectually. Campus censorship prevents them from using their own judgement and reacting with criticism, and thereby prevents them from acquiring judgement and the habit of criticism.

Campus censorship is inconsistent with university culture, with the intellectual's way of encountering the world.

Not many of my students much like this argument, I'm sad to say. I suspect that that is because they do not think of themselves as aspiring intellectuals. They come to university for training and credentials so that they can embark on careers. They don't actually have a taste for intellectual community.

Then again, neither do many professors or administrators, at least at Saint Mary's. Much more troubling than my students' easy acceptance of censorship in their lives is the indifference of deans, vice-presidents, and presidents to this acceptance, for their indifference will ensure that my students remain uneducated, whatever degrees they win.