

Paying big to fix what isn't broken

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Included in the recommendations Saint Mary's University received on 19 December from the President's Council are creating an action team to monitor implementation of the council's recommendations, having university personnel oversee initiation week, gathering data about sexualized violence on campus, creating a unit to investigate and adjudicate accusations of sexualized violence, expanding the role of the Women's Centre, and (maybe) adding an Equity Office.

None of those recommendations can be implemented without money, and implementing all of them would take a lot of money.

That money would have to come from current budget lines, as cash-strapped governments are not likely to help out. Will the money come from reductions in athletics or administrator's salaries? Will parking fees be increased?

Likely enough, the necessary money will come from the academic side of the university. Professors will give up teaching and research time to serve on committees and teams, and departments will go understaffed in favour of new equity administrators and experts on sexualized violence.

Well, if implementing the recommendations decreases the level of sexualized violence on campus, or improves the condition of marginalized students, or creates a culture of respect, wouldn't it be worth paying the cost?

The trouble is, the report gives no evidence that there are any problems of sexualized violence or lack of respect on campus. We've no reason to think that anything at Saint Mary's needs fixing.

The President's Council, recall, was formed in mid-September following the posting of a video of a rape chant performed during initiation week by as many as four-hundred Saint Mary's students. That such a chant was performed, and that it had been performed during initiation for a number of years, remained the only facts regarding sexualized violence and lack of respect at Saint Mary's on the council's plate.

We can certainly conclude from the chant that a good number of students can, in a particular sort of environment, be clueless, callous, and disgusting. But that's a very slender basis from which to conclude that we at Saint Mary's need to be told how to promote a culture of safety, respect, and consent.

The waste of money and resources the report would encourage is only part of the problem, though. Just as significant is the bad effect implementing its recommendations would have on campus culture.

The recommendations are big on oversight and control by university officials. The council would have Saint Mary's develop a university-wide code of conduct, for instance. It would also have incoming students attend mandatory awareness programs.

Codes of conduct and mandatory awareness programs are out of keeping with the mission of a university, though, for they are means of indoctrinating people into preferred attitudes and of ensuring compliance through the threat of punishment. A university, on the other hand, should be a place where people come to their values freely, through their own reasons. We want our students to be respectful and considerate because such attitudes promote the academic goals of intellectual community and developing an understanding of the world. Those students and professors who value these goals don't need to be trained or coerced into respectful behaviour, while those who do need to be trained or coerced aren't going to get anything out of university and shouldn't be at a university in the first place.

The law of the land is enough to ensure safety and security on campus. Violence and harassment are, after all, crimes. After that, non-criminal bad behaviour, the sort of behaviour, that is, that prevents us from fully coming together in intellectual community, can be corrected and minimized by discussion and example.

Should we at Saint Mary's follow the tendency of the recommendations, we will find ourselves hemmed in by legalism and suspicion. This is the opposite of the free acceptance of each other as fellow inquiries and discussants that gives a university its meaning.

It was right and proper that the student leaders behind the rape chant resigned their positions in the students' association, for they had lost the confidence of the people they represent. It was right and proper for groups at the university to hold discussions of the incident. On the other hand, a President's Council was certainly not called for, which the report the council has issued more than amply confirms.

Sometimes reports get shelved and collect dust until everyone has forgotten that they were ever commissioned. Let us hope that that is the fate of this current report, for the sake both of saving the university money and, more importantly, preserving intellectual community on its campus.