

Can Saint Mary's survive the Action Team on sexualized violence?

Prince Arthur Herald, 1 September 2014

<http://princearthurherald.com/en/politics-2/can-saint-marys-survive-the-action-team-on-sexualized-violence-775>

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All sorts of institutions get called universities these days, so the question isn't whether an institution called Saint Mary's University will survive. The question is whether it will remain a true university.

A true university is one committed to liberal education. An institution committed to liberal education will be marked by wide academic freedom for professors and wide freedom of expression and freedom of association on campus generally. At institutions of liberal education, students and professors congregate so that they might think for themselves. That's why academic freedom and the civil liberties are necessary, for, without them, thinking can be molded by pressures to fit in and fears of punishment.

Saint Mary's commitment to liberal education has been shaky for about a decade, but the Action Team on sexualized violence, formed to implement the recommendations of the President's Council, threatens to dissolve that commitment altogether.

The President's Council was appointed last year after the rape chant incident that occurred during orientation week. Its twenty-two recommendations combine a scant few worthy ideas and initiatives with many more draconian proposals for oversight and control of what happens on campus. The Action Team, as was made clear at a public presentation 27 August, is keen to remodel Saint Mary's according to the most intrusive and repressive of the Council's recommendations.

Safety, inclusiveness, and respect are the three core values the Action Team hopes to serve. Yes, we want our university to be safe and inclusive, and for people to treat each other respectfully. So how has the Action Team gone wrong?

Keep in mind that no evidence has surfaced that Saint Mary's has a problem regarding sexualized violence. The rape chant incident was not itself an instance of sexualized violence, and little data exist that speak to the prevalence of sexual assault or rape on campus or by members of the Saint Mary's community.

The Action Team intends to increase our awareness of sexualized violence by conducting climate surveys. But climate surveys gather perceptions and fears, not data regarding sexual assault itself. The Action Team, then, would remake Saint Mary's culture on the basis of irrelevant and misleading data.

As far as we know, Saint Mary's has no safety problem to address. In any case, if it did, it's the police or security experts that the university should turn to, not a president's council.

What about inclusiveness? Again, no evidence exists that people are being ignored or shunned because of discrimination based on prejudice. Saint Mary's appears already to be a warm, welcoming, encouraging place for students.

When we come to what the Action Team wants to do to foster respect, we come to what is most distressing about the future of liberal education at Saint Mary's.

The Action Team seeks to train people in the behaviours and, indeed, attitudes it prefers. It will require students to complete an online programme about consent. Forcing them to do this, when it is outside their academic programmes, is inconsistent with respecting their freedom to choose extra-curricular activities for themselves. Just as bad is that these programmes are not about inquiry and discussion, but about parroting the preferred correct responses.

The Action Team proposes also to write and implement a university-wide code of conduct. Codes of conduct, though, enforce behaviours with rewards and punishments. They do not promote unforced respect for others as fellow students and academics.

Now behind all this, of course, is the university's desire that students do not engage in rape chants. No one wants to hear another rape chant, but we should want that we don't hear one simply because no cares to participate in one. That is, we would like it that people were not callous about rape and suffering, and were not clueless about what their leaders are encouraging them to do. But we would also like that they acquire their attitudes for their own good reasons, not because they forced into them (or into pretending they have them).

Here we have the basic irony in the Action Team's approach to respect. The Team would treat us, students and professors alike, disrespectfully—in order that we conform to its policy of respect.