

In Search of a Community

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Let me say in the beginning of this writing that I learned much from my colleagues in this summer's seminar. Their openness, willingness to challenge one another's ideas, and inclusiveness, enriched my experience. I thank all of them for helping me learn from their dialogue.

In making my decision to join the summer seminar on the Catholic University and Academic Freedom, I had two questions on my mind. First, does the idea of academic freedom apply to a staff person or administrator who does not teach in the classroom? Specifically, does it apply to the student affairs professionals who are often responsible for dealing with recognition of controversial student organizations, speakers on campus, or public demonstrations. Are these staff members protected by academic freedom?

Secondly, how can faculty, protected by academic freedom, partner with student affairs professionals and student leaders, who are more at risk, to engage in more deliberate dialogue and discussion of controversial issues on our campus?

However, as the seminar progressed, a third question evolved. Could the idea or concept of "community", which was stressed in the summer orientation program, play a role in creating open dialogue and encouraging a free exchange of differing ideas or conflicting positions on our campus?

It seems clear that academic freedom applies to faculty in their teaching and research roles at Catholic universities. In the Land O' Lakes statement: *The Value of Contemporary Catholic University* 1967, a group of university presidents and other officials stated: "To perform its teaching and research functions effectively, the Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community."

Some faculty and staff would add that academic freedom should apply to certain activities pursued not only by faculty, but also by students.

Students' academic projects in the form of written plays, or speeches are examples of possible activities that might bring criticism and should be protected from censorship.

However, in my experience as Dean of Student Life and as Associate Dean of Students over the last ten years at the University of St. Thomas, I have not been aware of the classroom teaching or research activities which have raised questions of appropriateness or controversy for a Catholic college or university. It has been the campus-wide programs, speakers on campus, and other non-academic events which have been seen as controversial on our campuses.

Let me present a few examples of some of these situations outside of the classroom which have caused controversy at several affluent Catholic colleges and universities.

-The Margaret Sanger poster issue: In the university library, a poster of Margaret Sanger was taken down by an unknown person. The question arose over whether the poster should be replaced because Margaret Sanger was the founder of Planned Parenthood.

-The Silent Cemetery display: The creation of a cemetery on university grounds to symbolize the number of abortions performed within a certain time period. The question was whether this was an appropriate program for Pro-Life Week. Should opportunities for dialogue and discussion always occur regardless of the topic or how in line the program is with church teachings and doctrine?

-The videotaping of the Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, Transgender support meeting: As people gathered for the university's GLBT support meeting, a program sponsored by the university's campus ministry, they were videotaped by two people who were not members of the group. Although it was not clear why they were taping the people who attended the meeting, there was a fear that the intent was to victimize or harm members of the group. The issues were of guaranteeing safety and freedom of harm for all of our students and of what should happen to the individuals who videotaped the gathering.

-Criticism of speakers on campus: A college and its hosting student organization were challenged by the Archbishop for hosting a well known feminist personality who spoke about the importance of college students voting. The issue centered on the speaker's answer to a question whether the controversy over abortion could ever have common ground and agreement. Questions were raised over the appropriateness of having a noted pro-choice speaker on a Catholic campus, even if pro-choice was not the purpose or topic of her speech.

-Use of university vehicles to attend the animal rights protest. A university-recognized animal rights group used university vehicles to attend protests at a meat production plant where students were arrested. The issue concerned use of university vehicles to attend an event where students intentionally broke the law and whether policies for use of the van were violated. An additional issue was the publicity given to the university concerning an illegal action by a university-recognized club or organization.

-There are other, less public, issues such as educational programs about AIDS, programs on sexual violence, dating/relationships, and sexual health. Even mailings in campus mailboxes about spring break safety or about Pro-Life Week have given cause for controversy.

The majority of these cases or events, usually involved student organizations and were investigated, adjudicated or resolved with the assistance of a student affairs staff member. In these often highly publicized events, the staff members who worked with the students or clubs and the university to resolve the issues were not protected by academic freedom.

In addition, these staff members are generally not even under a formal contract, but serve their institution at the will of the president and/or administration.

Even in cases where faculty are involved as faculty advisors, questions arise over whatever academic freedom protects these advisors in these situations.

The experience of the seminar did not give me new insight as to how non-teaching personnel are protected from criticism or potential dismissal in these highly public events. I believe most of the staff in student affairs accepts these conditions of their work, but it does not diminish their fear or uncomfortableness in supporting students who want to engage in controversial programs or events. In fact, many staff members are unsure about their support from the university and protection from dismissal. It has a chilling effect on how they do their jobs and whether they should support students to engage in controversial, yet important, issues.

St. Thomas is not alone in resolving these controversial issues or in deciding how or if discussion on controversial issues takes place on campus. The climate of our Catholic campuses leaves our student affairs staff wondering how to work with students on these issues. Dr. Kevin Duffy, Vice President of Student Affairs at Boston College, states the following in "Are We Compromising the Catholicism of the Institution? The Debate on Student Groups on Campus: Civil & Ecclesial Considerations" as Part of the 1992 Symposium "Institutional Identity and the Religious Impact of Catholic Higher Education":

"We must also, and I firmly believe in this, guarantee freedom of assembly and of speech to all sides in the issue. That is, we must guarantee the right to use our facilities to meet, even if we are saying no. Not just some sort of an abstract conceptual guarantee of freedom of speech, but very concrete. We feel we cannot register this group. However, this is a university, and we encourage debate, we promote inquiry, we invite people to get involved and talk about this issue because we believe that values that are discussed and challenged will be better values. We can't afford to stonewall, and very often that is what we are trying to do. We do it by making no decision, we do it by trying to drag them out hoping the students are going to graduate before we have to make a decision and the next group won't take it up with the same enthusiasm. In all of this we have to be aware of the bunker mentality, that is, when the topic comes up we sort of tuck it down and hope it goes away. If we

I regret that as campus administrators we have often engaged in the bunker mentality, hoping if we delay long enough the issue will go away. Again, I think it is the fear of what may occur to us if we openly engage in debate and conversation on controversial issues that makes us act this way. I believe most staff would rather develop and promote programs which would allow open discussion on any topic, especially AIDS and sexual health. I believe these programs would be carefully planned and inclusive of Catholic teaching which would clarify where the church and the university are in regard to their positions on these difficult and often avoided issues.

What is important in these programs and discussions is to clarify the church's position on these difficult issues, as well as how the issues should be taught. I am not sure many students understand these positions.

Dr. Duffy, in the symposium, mentioned earlier in this writing states:

"One thing that wasn't mentioned today is our young people have absolutely no understanding of the hierarchy of the church, of terms like magisterium or dogma; they have no sense whatsoever of the political implications of decisions that are made. For them, the church is not the hierarchy of the church; it's not the bishop; it's not the local cardinal. They're not opposed to these folks, but when they make decisions, considerations about how the hierarchy of the church feels about a topic, in most cases, does not enter into their decision-making process."

Situations which occur around discussing controversial issues are opportunities and teachable moments. It is a time to meet the students where they are developmentally. Often they are not familiar not only with church teaching on these issues, but also have limited knowledge of the types of values' issues that are at the core of why we want to have programming on these topics. Students need help in obtaining information which will help them make good decisions when experiencing the on-going challenges of living in today's society.

When programming on controversial issues is limited to viewpoints of one side or another, the results are not often what is appreciated. Differing opinions appear in the form of chalking and other messaging about the issue. These techniques often anger people. Those angered demand something be done to those who chalked or leafleted. Other actions which violate university policies often occur. The issues festers and even leads to personal confrontations and physical violence. When students feel they have no voice, they act out.

Students are not necessarily asking to create organizations which are challenging of university and church values or to have open disruptive demonstrations which are contrary to the university policies and decisions. Students with whom I have discussed these issues say that these actions are not necessary if their voices can be heard and they feel their issues can be discussed openly and without fear.

So what can we do differently? Is there a way in which our campus community can be more open in helping students engage in the dialogue they need in grappling with the tough personal decisions they will be making on issues of health, sex, and faith? How can we model tolerance of those views and opinions which are different from our own?

This summer (1997) during the new student orientation program the university began a new discussion with our incoming students about "the idea of community" at the University of St. Thomas. Community was defined as more than just a place where people work, study or live in a common place. It was defined as an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location who value differences and realize

their own growth and education depend on understanding and valuing one another's differences. Our campus was described as a place where people from different faiths, different values, different cultures and different ideas can come together to learn and understand.

Community at UST was also described as a special place where people can care about one another, where people seek to help another and intervene in one another's lives to keep them from being hurt or harmed. Creating community is about being honest and holding ourselves and others accountable for our behavior and actions. It means telling others when they are harming the community. Community was also described as a place to celebrate traditions, old and newly created. It calls for us to honor one another and the accomplishments of the community itself.

We shared with students that for the idea of community to work, we must all be committed to a higher set of values. They were asked to commit to one another by promising civility and respect. Students were also asked to acknowledge the principles of faith, learning and service as foundations for their life at St. Thomas.

I could not help thinking about these shared ideas on community when we were struggling about academic freedom and dissent this summer in the seminar.

It is too naive to think a campus could be a community which embraces open dialogue and values differences? Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., in his article "The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University" describes universities since their founding in the Middle Ages

"as having always been unruly places, almost by nature, since the university is a place where young people come of age—an often unruly process—places where the really important issues are freely discussed with all of solutions proposed, places where all the burning issues of the day are ventilated, even with hurricane winds at times. Again, by nature, the university—even, or perhaps especially, the Catholic University—has always been dedicated uniquely to criticism of itself and everything else, of those things held most dear."

I was attracted to St. Thomas because I believed Catholic colleges & universities created "special communities." Communities where faith was celebrated and never backed away from. Where faith allowed us to talk openly about all topics. Naomi M. Meath, in her article, "Diversity and Change: A View from the Margin", said it well—"Since the rise of science in the modern world, the official church has come to understand what Catholic and other intellectuals long knew: that the life of faith has nothing to fear from the life of the mind."

She added later in her article:

"for its part, the academy has nothing to fear from the life of faith. A pivotal convection of university life is that truth emerges through the free exchange of ideas. No idea is off

limits for discussion, discussions which may be heated or disparate, but which are expected to be conducted with civility and respect for others and their ideas. So it is with ideas of faith, agnosticism, or atheism. All are welcome, perhaps more so in this Catholic University of Our Lady than in the classroom elsewhere."

I believe this deeply, and struggle with the reality that in our students' eyes this openness does not always happen for them. How can we make the University of St. Thomas a better place for our students in this regard?

I do not think the university would need to do this by creating clubs or organizations which are in conflict with church teachings or by changing opening school celebrations to become more ecumenical, as some have suggested. What I believe we do need is to model our respect for one another through the principles of community earlier described. I believe we can do more to bring our students closer to their faith and the church by not avoiding the "hot topics" or "bunkering" into delaying our decisions about controversial issues.

But how?

I believe the answer is in the actions of faculty, staff and administration. It is through our collective commitment to take risks and to show interest in parts of campus life which are not always our responsibility which may make the difference. Student affairs staff need to be more interested in academic issues and programs. Likewise, faculty need to be more interested and involved in extra-curricular activities and issues.

Many of those reading this piece may be surprised to read there is such a need for more dialogue and discussion, because it is modeled daily in their classrooms or in their offices or programs. However, I believe there is a need. There is a need for partnerships between faculty, staff, and students to create the opportunities for debate, respectful disagreement and programs inviting all viewpoints of difficult issues.

I know many of us are not sure how to do this, we need help. So guidelines, training and extra funding for developing and promoting programs would be helpful. But more importantly, we need to consider the idea of community and how personally each of us can become more committed to the ideas embraced by the fundamentals of our faith for the caring and respect of others in times of agreement and in times of differences.

End Notes

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