

SENSITIVITY AND DISCOURSE

Rev. Dennis H. Holtschneider, CM

President

April 15, 2016

A few days ago, Gene Zdziarski, our vice president for Student Affairs, sent students a reminder of the university's long-standing [policies on political campaign activities](#) on campus as well as our established [principles on free speech](#). Today, I'd like to add a few reflections about the conflicts that occur between the ideals of free speech and the effects of that speech.

Universities as Intellectually Porous Organizations

The world's conflicts inevitably manifest themselves at a university. Our students, faculty and staff are not removed from the world. We are immersed in the world's conversations and arguments, and those ideas come barreling into university discourse.

Universities do not erect barriers to keep out ideas, however controversial. Quite the contrary, we welcome the interplay of opposing viewpoints and try to elevate the conversation. We bring data to bear on controverted questions. We seek to find the logical fallacies and errors in arguments that are being made. We bring the accumulated knowledge of many disciplines to the conversation in order to reframe it - or even to offer fresh alternatives.

If we are doing our part as an intellectual community, we must engage the topics of the day with all their apparent weaknesses. We must begin with curiosity, not outrage; exploration, not opinion. We do this not only to refine better ideas, but to create the conditions for people to genuinely hear the other and be heard by the other - a space for inquiry.

Rules, Policies and Principles

When I was growing up, my siblings and I used to torture my poor mother with questions about what was allowed and what wasn't. We'd always find an example that stretched beyond the rules, and my mother would brilliantly invent new rules on the spot.

That's the weakness of rules and policies. They offer direction in particular and familiar situations, yet there are inevitably situations that were not anticipated or that do not fit easily. And so, it is to be expected that, from time to time, we will find ourselves discussing the ground rules of our discussions. Last week, people raised questions of what was permitted to be chalked on our sidewalks. In the future, other matters will almost certainly be explored.

Where policies fail to offer clarity, we turn to principles, but they too have an inherent weakness. Two principles, equally valuable, may conflict in the crucible of a single situation. The same situation last week drew claims on behalf of free speech as well as pleas for concern about the effect of that speech on members of the campus community.

We try to balance these principles as best we can and establish consistency to provide direction, but universities are transient organizations. Students graduate; new students arrive. The composition of our faculty and staff changes as well. We are always in a position of educating our community about these principles and trying to find as optimal a resolution of conflicting claims as possible. Inevitably, one side or another, or even both, will be unsatisfied with a resolution, and so concepts of compromise and "live-and-let-live" become critical as a basis for any society and university.

Discomfort and Safety

I never cease to be surprised when people ask DePaul's administration to protect them from unwelcome ideas. Some asserted last week that the mere mention of the name Trump was offensive and should be prevented. We will never do that. Other groups over the years have asserted that student demonstrations outside the student center made them feel unsafe. We did not support those assertions either.

DePaul ultimately will disappoint those who request us to protect members of the university community from ideas they find unwelcome. We couldn't do that if we tried, and it's antithetical to an intellectual community. Instead, we invite and assist broadened conversations. We pay for expert speakers. We organize debates. We host protests. In short, when it comes to potentially upsetting ideas, we create the conditions for people to challenge and defend those ideas.

At DePaul, safety is a matter of physical protection, not intellectual protection. We are a thoroughfare for the world's ideas. We engage those ideas actively. We don't protect students from them.

That said, it is clear that some groups intentionally set out to provoke a response so that they can manufacture victim status for themselves, draw support from outside organizations, or simply increase attendance at their events. Such behavior is manipulation. It's unworthy of DePaul and we will hold individuals accountable in these cases. But we will also resist those who are provoked too easily and/or who ask senior administrators to take care of situations they do not care to engage themselves.

In short, the administration will not rise to every instance of asserted outrage. The responsibility for a vibrant intellectual debate rests with everyone. The mere assertion that one was offended is not a reason for administrative action.

Righteous Indignation as a Drug

Whether one's preferred source of information is MSNBC, Fox News, the Huffington Post or the Drudge Report, there is no shortage of righteous indignation to be sampled on nearly any subject. It's tempting to reproduce that inside a university, and yet I hope we won't.

Righteous indignation is a drug, and it's ultimately unhelpful. No one benefits when we portray contrary ideas as idiocy or entirely without merit. Better ideas are not formed when arguments are simply repeated among those who are sure to agree, or in the "safe" distance of social media. Solutions that address concerns on both sides are unlikely when we claim that God is on our side. People simply walk away feeling reassured that their ideas are right and the other side's are hopelessly, even dangerously, mistaken. It's a high, but all that's been accomplished is a firming up of the divisions among us.

DePaul will always invite students to see the fuller complexity of issues that, at first blush, appear simple. We'll invite students to meet with those who hold opposing viewpoints. If the concerns are about DePaul itself, we will meet with students to see how our policies and procedures should change, but we also will ask them to listen in turn to information that might further inform their indignations. My sincere hope is that students will accept these invitations and that their faculty advisors will encourage them to do so.

Virtue

Charles Schulz once drew Snoopy atop his doghouse typing a theology manuscript. When asked if he had a good title, Snoopy replied that he has the perfect one: "Has It Ever Occurred to You That You Might Be Wrong?"

Humility is the basis of the intellectual life. We can't learn unless we believe we have something to learn from one another. Kindness, patience, forgiveness and other virtues, too, are the bedrock of human community. For what is an intellectual community if not a successful human community first?

Disputing ideas can feel risky, but knowing that others will give us the space to be wrong, and knowing they will challenge our ideas with kindness, creates the conditions in which we all can be empowered to take that risk to test ideas and explore changing ideas. It harms no one to show sensitivity when others assert that certain speech or formulations are offensive to them.

The phrase "All Lives Matter," for example, sounds obvious, even banal. In fact we are all aware it is frequently used to reject out-of-hand the core message of the "Black Lives Matter"

movement. Members of our community are calling for attention to the indignities and injustice suffered by the black community, and it's simply insensitive to repeat something that we know in advance will bring pain and frustration to others. Our policies are not devised to prevent its use. Nor can we compel students to avoid its use. Can DePaul ask our students for kindness and sensitivity? Yes.

Love for our colleagues and classmates turns out to be the oil that smooths intellectual engagement. And so, at DePaul, we ask something more of our intellectual community. We ask for kindness. We cannot enforce it by law, or even by rules, but we can ask it all the same. And we will.

"We were a close-knit, supportive group."

Two weeks ago, Dr. Yvette Francis-McBarnett passed away at the age of 89. A Jamaican immigrant, she entered Hunter College at 14, went on for a master's at Columbia, and then entered Yale medical school at 19. Of her many accomplishments over a long life, she is perhaps best known for discovering that simple antibiotics made sickle cell anemia a chronic condition to be managed rather than a childhood death sentence.

The New York Times wrote in her obituary this past Sunday (April 10, 2016),

She was breaking ground as a woman - and especially as a black woman - at the very beginning of the civil rights movement. She was a second-year medical school student when she wrote a letter to The Pittsburgh Courier, one of the nation's leading black newspapers, urging prospective black students to apply. She later said of her white classmates, "We were a close-knit, supportive group." (Emphasis added.)

My prayer is that the same will be said of DePaul. May our students describe the university as a diverse, close-knit community. May our intellectual community engage ideas - and each other - with equal portions of conviction and kindness.

Thank you for considering these rather long reflections. Thank you, too, for being the DePaul University I'm proud to work among.

God bless you.