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The real academic freedom debate

Letter to the Editor

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In the debate about academic freedom, the point has been made many times that sponsorship need not imply endorsement. I suppose that is true, but less relevant than the point which has scarcely been made at all: that academic freedom does not imply a right to University sponsorship. The obverse follows logically: A decision of the University not to sponsor is not a violation of academic freedom.

If the act at some administrative level of the University of declining to sponsor some event is an act of censorship, then censorship is rampant at this University, and at every university.

I have taught at Notre Dame for 39 years and have never felt that my academic freedom was infringed upon. But it never occurred to me that I had a right derived from academic freedom to demand that University funds be allocated to sponsor any or every event dear to my heart.

Suppose that I and two other members of my department have an idea for an event, say, to be very concrete, a rally in support of the right-to-work law recently proposed in Indianapolis. The department chairperson says: No, that is not a good idea, not the best use of department time and money, and denies department funds. Is the chairperson's decision a violation of our academic freedom? Or suppose that the department votes by a vote seven to five not to sponsor the rally. Has a tyrannical majority censored us? Or suppose the department approves by a vote of seven to five, but the president of the University vetos that decision. Has the decision by the president now risen to the level of an assault on academic freedom?

There is room for debate about the appropriate locus of decision making in the University; but that does not seem to be a debate about academic freedom. It may be reasonable to argue that most decisions about how to spend University funds allocated to a department should generally be made at the department level. On the other hand, if the issue is compatibility with Catholic values, it seems plausible that a department composed mostly of non-Catholics with no particular attachment to Catholic values and, in some cases, quite sincerely and openly antagonistic to certain official Catholic teachings, would be in a poor position to judge.

It is inevitable that there will be vigorous debate about which events deserve University sponsorship, since not all events can be sponsored or are worthy of being sponsored. It is misleading and unsporting for certain participants to try to advance the case for their favored events under the banner of academic freedom. Most of the debates I have heard about "The Vagina Monologues" have been solely about whether the "Monologues" are a good idea and have had virtually nothing to do the principles of academic freedom. If someone with the authority to do so decides that the "Monologues" are not a good idea, that is not censorship, that is decision-making.

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