

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

Jenkins decision prompts campus approval

Faculty members voice support for statement

Mary Kate Malone

Posted: 4/6/06

Convinced their academic departments will not be stripped of their autonomy, faculty members from all corners of campus expressed virtually unanimous approval Wednesday for University President Father John Jenkins' closing statement on academic freedom and Catholic character.

After heated Faculty Senate meetings, loaded Observer editorials and widespread debate among professors across campus in recent weeks, some of the strongest voices in those discussions praised Jenkins for his consideration of other opinions in his decision not to prohibit "The Vagina Monologues" at Notre Dame.

"I can't remember the last time I saw a public figure say 'Here's a problem, this is what I think, let me know what you think and I'll pay attention,'" history professor Gail Bederman said. "And [he has] modified his position based on what people have told him."

Bederman, who has been an advocate for academic freedom and a strong presence at many discussions, speeches and forums on the topic in recent weeks, said she was not surprised with Jenkins statement.

"My impression is that he's putting us in the context of what has been a normal academic procedure for the past 40 years or so - [that is,] just because it's performed at a University does not imply endorsement of points of view," Bederman said.

Bederman said similar language is standard among the American Association of University Professors' statements on academic freedom - guidelines brought up frequently at Student Senate and Faculty Senate meetings in recent weeks.

Philosophy professor Ed Manier - who wrote numerous letters to the editor in The Observer on the topic - said he "wholeheartedly supports" Jenkins' closing remarks, but was skeptical that he did not include remarks on student academic freedom.

Manier said Jenkins' statement means students cannot sponsor discussions contrary to Catholic teaching in the way academic departments can.

"Academic departments are best situated to decide what events should or should not be sponsored," Jenkins said in his statement. "Sponsors have a role in communicating the academic rationale for controversial events."

For Manier, that language left some questions unanswered.

"This [statement], to me, has a tendency to implicitly label some of these topics as academic, rather than practical," Manier said. "In other words, it's something that academics can be trusted to investigate, but ordinary folks - students, the Catholic laity - don't have the same freedom to this inquiry."

"We've got freedom in the area under the Provost, but not in the area of the Vice President of Student Affairs? That's an unanswered question."

Director of Student Activities Brian Coughlin said he never expected Jenkins to articulate a definitive statement on programming standards for Student Activities, since his original statement was centered on academic department sponsored events - not events sponsored by his office.

"We don't really see the conversation that has been going on specifically addressing student programs or student organization programs," Coughlin said. "We saw it more as an issue affecting academic freedom."

Coughlin addressed the issue in a recent Campus Life Council meeting where he clarified that his office hasn't had to - and doesn't plan to - apply stricter standards when considering what events or programs it will sponsor.

"There hasn't been an occurrence over the last five years in Student Activities that we've turned down a program by a recognized student group or organization for content ... we fall back on the Open Speaker's policy in DuLac," Coughlin said.

Film, Television and Theater department chair Peter Holland agreed with Jenkins that it is an academic department's responsibility to draw a distinction between sponsorship and endorsement.

"[His final statement] seems a continuation of where we were rather than a change of policy," Holland said. "The crucial thing is that we keep explaining to people within the University and outside it that sponsorship is not the same as endorsement."

English department chair Stephen Fredman said he had no qualms or unanswered questions after reading Jenkins' statement, which he called "a tremendously important gesture."

"I think maybe Jenkins is coming to understand that one of the hallmarks of his presidency will be a renewed focus on gender issues and a sense of moving forward in that direction," Fredman said.

Fredman said Jenkins' leadership "seems to be consultative, which is good. He has consulted with as wide a group as possible before making a decision."

Across the board, professors agreed with Jenkins' selection of the University's need to eliminate violence against women as its "most urgent goal."

Like Bederman, Dean of the College of Arts and Letters Mark Roche said he was impressed with Jenkins' ability to seek out the University community's opinion on the issue.

English professor Glenn Hendler said the facilitation of more dialogue is the solution when the University deals with events or programs that might go against Catholic teaching in the future.

"One thing that was a pleasant surprise - instead of taking "The Vagina Monologues" to be the problem, [Jenkins] has held it up to be a model for the way it's been handled this year ... not the play [itself] but the performance of it and the things faculty and student have organized around it."

Bederman said Jenkins' statement is neither a compromise, nor a slanted decision in favor of one side, since that could lead to the strict polarization that dominates modern politics in the U.S, she said.

"What we're supposed to do at a university is to not let one side or another win, but to find truth," she said. "He's looked for the truth and put a framework in place to find the very best way to be a university."

© Copyright 2007 The Observer