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Catholic university debate continues Campus discusses academic freedom, religious concerns.

SOUTH BEND -- Outstanding Catholic universities should be "open circles," free to engage in discussion about all that is worth knowing, including sexuality, according to the Rev. James Heft, chancellor at the University of Dayton.

But that right is not absolute, the priest said.

"A Catholic university needs to adjust this idea of academic freedom to include the privileging of Catholic intellectual traditions that must be at the heart of a mission of a Catholic university," Heft said.

Heft and Jonathan Knight, director of the Program in Academic Freedom and Tenure for the American Association of University Professors, spoke during a forum Wednesday at Notre Dame on the topic "Academic Freedom at a Catholic University." The discussion drew about 100 faculty and students.

Notre Dame is caught between aspirations to be accepted as unique and Catholic, and expectations of the secular academic world, Heft said. "There are people who would like to reduce the university to a parish. It is not a parish," he said. Campus debates about artistic merit occur frequently, Knight said, although many relate to art exhibits rather than theatrical productions. "The perception is more readily cultivated that in displaying the art, that somehow carries an endorsement by the institution," he said.

The discussion was ignited in January, when the Rev. John I. Jenkins, Notre Dame's president, invited students, faculty and alumni to discuss whether a gay film series and an annual student performance of "The Vagina Monologues" should be allowed to continue on campus.

Neither guest speaker offered a specific opinion about what decision Jenkins should make.

Jenkins is concerned the annual events suggest that Notre Dame endorses the contents, which some people perceive to be at odds with the university's Catholic character.

Organizers of the Queer Film Festival agreed to change the name to "Gay & Lesbian Film: Filmmakers, Narratives, Spectatorships." Since then, the debate has focused almost exclusively on "The Vagina Monologues." At the University of Dayton, which is a Catholic institution, students performed "The Vagina Monologues" for three years. It prompted controversy.

This year, Dayton students instead created and performed a play called the "UD Monologues" based on student experiences, Heft said. The play illustrated a variety of personal stories from both male and female students pertaining to peer pressure, sexual assault, pregnancy and contraception.

"We had a lot of pressure from outside," Heft said. "If the university allows that external pressure to set its course, particularly in its teaching and research, it's making a mistake," he said.

Dayton took a course similar to Saint Mary's College. For the past two years, Saint Mary's students have performed "The SMC Monologues," based on personal essays submitted by students and other women on campus. This year's show included performances about menstruation, pregnancy, lesbianism, body image, rape and giving up a baby for adoption.

Notre Dame students since last year have been planning a similar student-written play to be performed on campus. The debate remains front and center for many professors who consider academic freedom of crucial importance. They draw a distinction between sponsoring an event and the university endorsing its contents.

If a university purchases a book on Marxist philosophy and places it in the campus library, that doesn't mean the university is endorsing Marxism, said Kevin Barry, associate director of Notre Dame's Kaneb Center for Teaching and Learning.

Sociology professor Joan Aldous said Americans have fought and died in wars to protect freedom of speech and thought in this country.

Jenkins did not attend the forum, although he has participated in other gatherings and discussions on the topic.

At a recent Arts & Letters faculty forum, there were repeated references to "The Vagina Monologues" alienating the university's "core constituencies" -- Notre Dame trustees and alumni who apparently have expressed displeasure about the play's performance on campus. While the campus discussion about academic freedom has been free flowing, trustees have not publicly participated.

The Rev. John D'Arcy, bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, issued public statements the past two years declaring that "The Vagina Monologues" is an inappropriate event for Notre Dame and urging the university to ban it.

United for Free Speech, a student organization, has collected about 2,400 signatures on a petition urging the president to

maintain academic freedom. The students will meet with Jenkins and present the petitions on March 20.

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