

The freedom to speak out against abortion

Written by John Carpay

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At the University of Calgary, setting up a pro-life display on campus can end your academic career. Last week, Vice-Provost Meghan Houghton found eight student guilty of a “major violation” of rules governing “non-academic misconduct” — a category that also includes theft, vandalism, arson, violence, and sexual assault.

Of course, the U of C is being careful about how it is framing its case, using the canard of campus security as a pretext for censorship: When the students resisted the university’s demand that they set up their graphic anti-abortion display such that no passersby could readily see the signs, they were accused of “failing to comply with the direction of a Campus Security Officer in the legitimate pursuit of his/her duties.”

The university has steadfastly refused to explain whether (or how or why) censoring the peaceful expression of opinion on campus is one of the duties of campus security.

It wasn’t always so. When the anti-abortionists’ controversial “Genocide Awareness Project” (GAP) was first displayed on campus in 2006, the U of C posted its own signs nearby, warning people of a shocking and disturbing display ahead, and stating that this expression was protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The GAP display generated debate and discussion on campus that was sometimes heated, but always civil and respectful.

In 2008, after this passive display had been set up on campus four times, always without problem or incident, the U of C suddenly and inexplicably demanded that the students (members of a group called Campus Pro-Life) set up their posters in a circle facing inwards, so that passersby could not view them without going out of their way to do so. This, claimed the university, was a “reasonable compromise” in the interest of “safety and security” on campus.

The students refused. No other group on campus had ever been asked to hide, shield, or minimize its message, even if the message was considered offensive, hurtful, shocking or disturbing. (Large colour photographs of torture perpetrated on adherents of the Falun Gong by Chinese communists are just one example.) Further, as tuition-paying students, the Campus Pro-Life activists claimed the same right to free speech enjoyed by all other students, free of discrimination based on viewpoint.

In 2009, the university charged the pro-life students with “trespassing” on their own campus. But

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the Crown Prosecutors' Office stayed the charges prior to trial, as the university was not able to explain what rule, regulation or bylaw the students had broken.

This past April, the students erected their display for the ninth time since 2006, again generating debate on campus, without problem or incident. This is when eight of the students were accused of "non-academic misconduct" and found guilty of a "major violation." They are appealing this ruling within the university's internal administrative procedures, but may end up going to court.

The U of C receives more than 60% of its funding from taxpayers: Alberta and the federal government give the university over \$600-million per year so it can pursue its stated mission "to seek truth and disseminate knowledge." When the U of C tries to censor the peaceful expression of one particular opinion on campus, it departs from that mission.

The U of C is also breaking an implicit promise to its own students, who pay tuition on the assumption that they can speak freely on campus, regardless of what their views may be.

So far, the eight students have been punished with nothing more than a warning. But they plan to continue setting up the GAP display twice per year, thereby risking expulsion from the university. While the students' commitment to their cause is inspiring and admirable, the U of C should not be putting them in a situation where they need to display such courage. Instead, the U of C should honour its mission, and extend equal tolerance to all views on campus.