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Benedictine Academic Freedom



Fifty years ago, in July 1967, a small group of Roman Catholic educators met at a conference center in Land O' Lakes, Wisconsin, which was owned by the University of Notre Dame. The leaders of the most important North American Catholic institutions were present and the group was led by Notre Dame President Theodore Hesburgh. In the wake of Vatican II, which had concluded two years earlier, the group was considering "The Nature and Mission of the Catholic University in the Modern World."

The backdrop for the conversation was the huge growth in higher education enrollment, particularly among Catholics students, in the post-World War II era, and the tremendous changes in the Catholic Church in following Vatican II.

The basic question for these leaders was this: Were Catholic universities first universities or first Catholic?

For the institutions represented at this meeting, the question is answered unequivocally in the opening sentences of what became known as the **Land O' Lakes Statement**:

The Catholic University today must be a university in the full modern sense of the word, with a strong commitment to and concern for academic excellence. To perform its teaching and research functions effectively the Catholic university

must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself. To say this is simply to assert that institutional autonomy and academic freedom are essential conditions of life and growth and indeed of survival for Catholic universities as for all universities.

The Statement goes on to emphasize the importance of a Catholicism that is “perceptibly present and effectively operative” in universities and stresses the importance of the role of theology and the theology faculty. The group also emphasizes the importance of Catholic social justice teachings and concerns with “ultimate questions.”

But what is remembered most from this conference is the emphasis on academic freedom and the need for autonomy from any external authority, lay or clerical.

These leaders were saying to prospective students (and their parents) that they would receive an education at Catholic universities that would be the academic equal of any public or private university. They were telling faculty that their ability to teach and research would in no way be compromised by choosing to make their careers at Catholic institutions. They were telling the world that Catholic universities were ready to take their place among the leading academic institutions in the United States, even as they maintained their strong Catholic identity. All these claims were to be built on the academic freedom that was the foundation of the modern university.

The influence and success in American life of those educated in the Catholic tradition and the enhanced academic reputations of Catholic universities during the past 50 years is a testament to the success of this vision. The finest Catholic universities in American today are viewed as the equals of their secular peers, and they compete for the best students in the world.

Fifty years later it is worth revisiting this important historic document to consider what Catholic universities owe our students today as we prepare them for lives of success and meaning in the 21st century.



Despite many changes in the world, from globalization to the technological revolution to an increasingly diverse world, most educators continue to believe the finest university education is still built on a foundation of academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas.

While this contention is not seriously debated in the academy (though there are **rare exceptions**) it is not a stretch to suggest that some observers outside of higher education are wondering about the depth and strength of the higher education's commitment to the free exchange of ideas, noted **here** and **here**. Recent incidents at the University of Missouri, Berkeley, Middlebury College and Evergreen State College have not shown higher education as a place where ideas are always exchanged freely and civilly.

We are not immune to these challenges around the exchange of ideas on our own campuses. I don't need to remind anyone here of the incident on The Link (bus) last February. We have had roommates break up over last fall's election. Incoming students have asked not to be placed with a roommate who shares different political views—a request we would not honor, even if we knew of incoming students' political views.

Resident assistant training now includes a discussion of managing political conflicts. Faculty members report that some students are reticent to participate in class discussions around issues of race, gender or social justice topics for fear of alienating other students or faculty.

Each of these incidents alone is troubling, and together they are a reminder that even with our strong Catholic and Benedictine tradition and sense of community, we must continually renew our commitment to Academic Freedom in a Benedictine ethos—what I might call Benedictine Academic Freedom.

The notion of academic freedom is well understood by those in this room. I think a **recent statement** by the University of Chicago's Committee on Freedom of Expression articulates the

notion well:

The University of Chicago fully respects and supports the freedom of all members of the University community “to discuss any problem that presents itself.” Of course, the ideas of different members of the University community will often and quite naturally conflict. But it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. Although the University greatly values civility, and although all members of the University community share in the responsibility for maintaining a climate of mutual respect, concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as a justification for closing off discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members of our community.

As central as academic freedom is to those in the academy, this notion may be new or not well understood by our students. For academic freedom to be most effective in educating our students, it is our responsibility to help our students both understand the concept intellectually and to support them emotionally during their intellectual engagement because, as the Chicago statement notes, the unfettered exchange of ideas can be uncomfortable or painful, even as it is foundational to the education we seek to provide.

Certainly, there are some limits on freedom of expression, as the Chicago statement also notes:

The University may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the University. In addition, the University may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of the University. But these are narrow exceptions to the general principle of freedom of expression, and it is vitally important that these exceptions never be used in a manner that is inconsistent with the University’s commitment to a completely free

and open discussion of ideas.



In the spirit of the Land O' Lakes and University of Chicago statements, the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, strongly support the free exchange of ideas as essential for our educational mission, even knowing how challenging exercising academic freedom can be. But I think, as Catholic and Benedictine institutions, we can aspire for even more from our community and from each other as we

engage in these sometimes hard conversations.

I think it is completely appropriate for us to ask of each other – not demand, but ask – that we engage in what I would characterize as Benedictine Academic Freedom. At CSB and SJU we should exercise our freedom of speech, and the challenges and discomfort that are inevitable, in a fashion consistent with our Benedictine values, with an emphasis on respect for individuals and listening.

Specifically, I would suggest that as we engage in the exchange of ideas together that we consider three things that will likely make those exchanges more civil and more likely to generate learning and understanding on both sides:

1. **Setting:** We should consider the time, place and context for any exchange. We must have open and willing partners engage in meaningful dialogue. (A captive audience on a Link bus does not qualify.)
2. **The Audience:** To be truly respectful of those we are interacting with, we must consider how we will be heard. Are there aspects of our audience's background or experiences that might make them especially sensitive to our ideas and words? Are there ways for us to soften or restate our views, without compromising our meaning?
3. **Reciprocity:** Just as we hope and expect to be heard respectfully, we must in turn be willing to listen generously and openly to the views of others, views that may well make us uncomfortable or even angry. "Listen with the ear of your heart," as St. Benedict reminds us in **The Rule**.

These three suggestions are certainly not easy, especially when the issues we discuss with each other are painful and personal, as most meaningful issues are. But if we can work together to practice the free exchange of ideas in a truly Benedictine spirit, to live out Benedictine Academic Freedom, our students and community will both receive the educational benefits from the free exchange of ideas, and we will build an even stronger community committed to respect and listening with the ear of our hearts.

And we will be educating Bennies and Johnnies who will be prepared to lead organizations and communities in a Benedictine way, an outcome we can all agree is a good thing.

Best wishes to all for the beginning of the new academic year, a time for hope in the possibilities of the future.

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