

## The Life of a Free Speech Task Force

By Nicholas G. Hahn III

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DePaul University, which bills itself as “the Largest Catholic University in America,” was described as a “basket case” on a *Hannity and Colmes* segment because of its questionable “commitment” to free speech. In the past couple of years DePaul has suspended, without due process, a professor who defended Israel. It has created *de facto* policies to prevent students from posting flyers opposing an on-campus event featuring the plagiarist professor Ward Churchill. It has also shut down a student-run Affirmative Action Bake Sale in which cookies were sold at different prices depending on the customer’s skin color because the campus left was offended. It later condemned the student group sponsoring the bake sale in a university-wide email. DePaul seemed to have no grasp of the freedoms vital to a university. To cope with the public relations problem its actions had created, last year DePaul president Rev. Dennis Holtschneider assembled a Free Speech and Expression Task Force, of which I was a student member, and charged it with creating a “policy” concerning speech on campus.

The Task Force has finally produced a document: *Guiding Principles of Free Speech and Expression*.<sup>[1]</sup> The Task Force chose a wise path in deciding against adopting speech codes against “hate speech,” a term which does not appear in the *Principles*. In fact, the language of the document seems to open the doors of the University to all ideas—as it should. It respects “open discourse and robust debate” and at the same time remains “open to a broad range of ideas and opinions” as a way to “create the best conditions for discovering the truth.” Most importantly, it’s not patronizing and it respects the “right of listeners to respond with their own expression, or choose to turn away.”

It’s also eloquent in its commitment to “ennoble the God-given dignity of each person”—wait just a minute, I’m sorry. Scratch that whole part about dignity being “God-given.” Such a reference would alienate members of our community who do not believe in God.

“What?” a concerned friend asked me when I informed him of what had happened.

“Yes,” I said, “the Task Force voted to remove ‘God-given’ from the *Guiding Principles* before releasing it to the university community. That’s not all. The Task Force also voted to remove the phrase ‘create the best conditions for discovering the truth.’ ‘Truth’ was too ‘strong’ and too ‘offensive’ a word for a free speech document.”

“Why?” my friend asked.

To understand why, it is important to examine the make-up of the Task Force committee. Typically, university-wide committees are hot seats for activist faculty and staff. Student representation is kept to a minimum, generally two or three in a committee of twenty. The professors sitting on Faculty Councils aren’t those professors who have a singular commitment to scholarship or teaching—no, not at all. These are professors who scratch, claw, and fight their way onto committees because, well, they miss their Berkeley days. The staff, too, is mostly comprised of former students who are predictably left-leaning. So already, university committees—the ones that make policy, distribute budgets, and hire new faculty—are, by their very nature, tilted well to the left. Very rarely does a conservative find his way on a university-wide committee, especially one that examines a controversial issue.

In my case, the university must have felt obliged to seat me on this Task Force, since its formation was primarily sparked by the campus discussions and events that my student organization, the DePaul

Conservative Alliance, had initiated. When I received the notice, I knew I was in for the long haul. However, except for concerns raised once in a while that our strategy of “no policy” may allow for *any* speech including that which is “offensive,” the drafting of the *Principles* went eerily well. We even decided to examine existing university policies concerning speech and offer revisions contingent upon the new *Principles*.

It was all too good to be true.

As soon as the President’s Diversity Council got wind that a Free Speech Task Force was working on *Principles* which were rumored not to prohibit “hate speech,” it made sure we heard its concerns. The Council sent its Teaching, Learning, and Negotiating Diversity subcommittee, which is comprised of some of the most aggressive professor-activists DePaul ever made the mistake of hiring. Its chair is Sociology professor Ted Manley, who has authored papers with titles such as “Teaching on White Racism: Tools for Consultant Training” and “Teaching Whites about Others and Social Change.” Another member of the committee is law professor Sumi Cho who once claimed in a university forum that in holding an Affirmative Action Bake Sale the DePaul Conservative Alliance members were engaging in “racial pornography.” Apparently we were sexually gratified by putting on an event designed to expose the hypocrisy of proposing racial preferences as a civil rights measure.

Manley and Cho told us our *Principles* were fundamentally invalid because we lacked a diverse racial make-up in membership. Isn’t it important to note the ideological diversity on this Task Force? “No,” Manley said, and pointing to the back of his hand added, “it is about this: skin color.” Cho then highlighted words and phrases in the *Principles* she considered to be “hegemonic.” Hegemonic phrases allegedly exclude the marginalized and oppressed. Among the highlighted phrases were: “free speech and expression,” “exercise of reason,” “competing arguments,” and “immeasurably enriched by exposure to differing points of view.” According to Cho, free speech should provide “an environment that encourages enfranchising the disenfranchised” and discontinues “the practice of exclusion and marginalization.” According to Cho, “hegemonic free speech” (her term) does the opposite. If this is the first time you’ve ever encountered the phrase “hegemonic free speech,” don’t assume you’re alone in that experience.

A less ideological person might ask whether free speech doesn’t by its very definition empower all ideas and give them the opportunity to be expressed? “No,” Cho responded indignantly when this was suggested: “Some members of the community are silenced by offensive speech.” *Silenced?* Isn’t that patronizing the “oppressed,” whom Cho is claiming to protect? Doesn’t this severely minimize the ability and indeed, the right of the “marginalized” to express their ideas?

Bowing to the Manley and Cho, the Task Force added some new members who met their diversity standard. Our newly assembled Task Force took up the concerns they raised. Not surprisingly, the new members were not only diverse by skin color, they were also ideologically in tune with Manley and Cho. Most of the Task Force now agreed that some speech *does* “threaten the community.” Some speech *does* silence, because it “wounds” and is “so hurtful.” Some people simply don’t have a voice. And so, students who are offended should be given a special “safe space” where they feel “comfortable” speaking publicly with potential offenders silenced.

Now the Task Force removed the phrase “discovery of the truth,” because the idea that there is “truth” can be harmful and excluding to the oppressed. So can “God-given dignity.” These are “right-wing buzzwords” in any case—at least according to the leftists on the Task Force. Sonia Soltero, a President’s Diversity Council appointee, was baffled by the concept that a university was founded on the pursuit of truth. She had never heard that before. She would rather understand the university as a place for “exploration” and “seeking knowledge.” And one of our new members, Theatre School professor Phyllis Griffin, even went so far as to say that whenever she reads “God-given dignity” she feels the “heavy, historical foot of the Catholic Church on her neck.” *Really?* At the largest Catholic University in America?

With these steps, the Task Force managed to change the idea of a university and denigrate the Church that had created theirs. All in just a couple strokes on the keyboard.

A university is not about feeling “comfortable.” The pursuit of truth is often the contrary. In fact, a university isn’t about “feelings” but knowledge. It is about reason and inquiry. As Greg Lukianoff, head of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, has often said: If you aren’t offended at least four times a day at a university, you should ask for your money back. And if you aren’t being offended, you must not be paying any attention. Students are better able to grasp ideas if their own are challenged.

Manley, Cho, Soltero, and Griffin can go on with their agendas—march in support of the Jena 6, make their annual donation to the Rainbow-Push Coalition, sign their friends up for Amnesty International’s e-newsletter, post a comment on DailyKos or whatever their activist hearts desire. But they should not think for one second that they are advocates of free speech. Or representatives of what a modern research university should be. The real advocates are those students who give voice to their beliefs and fearlessly engage in the ideas of others.

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**[1] *Guiding Principles of Free Speech and Expression:***

Free speech and expression are central to the purpose of the university. Research, scholarship, and education are impossible without open discourse and robust debate. The exercise of reason depends upon one’s ability both to express and to listen respectfully and critically to competing arguments. We aspire to be a community marked by compassion and mutual respect, in which we never lose sight of the potential effects, both beneficial and harmful, of our words and our expressive conduct. When such words or conduct harmfully affect the community or its members, we should respond by reflecting ever more seriously on our shared values of compassion and respect, and by fostering education about our enduring commitment to inclusiveness and reciprocal understanding. Ultimately, by remaining open to a broad range of ideas and opinions—even those that may appear to some detestable, uncomfortable, or false—we foster mutual understanding, test our beliefs, and create the best conditions for seeking knowledge. Intrinsic to our belief in the value of inclusive conversation is a commitment to the right of speakers to voice their viewpoints even at the risk of controversy, and a correlative respect for the right of listeners to respond with their own expression, or to choose to turn away.

DePaul’s vital and distinctive Catholic and Vincentian mission makes free expression particularly important at this university. Our mission places the highest priority on instruction and learning, activities that are immeasurably enriched by exposure to differing points of view. Our mission serves to foster a community of diverse beliefs and values in order to serve the common good inside and outside the university; such a community cannot thrive without full and open communication. And, above all, our mission strives to ennoble the dignity of each person. That dignity depends in no small measure upon the individual’s freedom to give voice to his or her beliefs.

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