



Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

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February 24, 2012

The Rev. Peter M. Donohue
Office of the President
Villanova University
800 Lancaster Avenue
Villanova, Pennsylvania 19085

Via U.S Mail and Facsimile (610-519-4514)

Dear Father Donohue:

As you can see from the list of our directors and board of advisors, FIRE unites civil rights and civil liberties leaders, scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals across the political and ideological spectrum on behalf of liberty, legal equality, academic freedom, due process, freedom of speech, and freedom of conscience on America's college campuses. Our website, thefire.org, will give you a greater sense of our identity and activities.

Together with the National Coalition Against Censorship, a group uniting over 50 national organizations dedicated to promoting the right to free speech (www.ncac.org), we are concerned by the threat posed to academic freedom and freedom of expression by Villanova's decision to cancel a weeklong workshop by performance artist Tim Miller. We are aware that Villanova takes very seriously its values as a Catholic institution, but we are also aware that one of those stated values is "[a] respect for academic freedom which makes open discussion and inquiry possible." Villanova must decide whether it will choose to honor the full spirit of its stated commitments to academic freedom or if it will choose to set a precedent that gives the administration discretion to override the judgment of its faculty on the basis of arbitrary and unspecified criteria.

This is our understanding of the facts; please correct us if you believe we are in error. Several months ago, faculty in Villanova's Department of Communication invited performance artist Tim Miller for a weeklong artist residency at the university. Although Miller is known for his controversial and sometimes sexually explicit performances, the purpose of the workshop was for participating students "to create original performances," with Miller as the facilitator. In the email announcing the workshop, Miller described it as follows:

The performance workshop will thus take you through an intimate process of self-discovery and exploration, focusing on identity and culture, questions of diversity and difference,

knowledge of self and others, etc. Throughout the week, each participant will develop and refine her/his own original, solo piece that will be performed on Friday, April 20.

Earlier this month, the university's decision to host the workshop came under condemnation from Catholic bloggers and commentators. Shortly thereafter, on Sunday, February 20, Villanova cancelled the workshop, and on February 21 issued a statement that

Villanova University embraces intellectual freedom and academic discourse. Indeed, it is at the very heart of our University and our Augustinian Catholic intellectual tradition. With regard to the forthcoming residency and performance workshops by Tim Miller, we had concerns that his performances were not in keeping with our Catholic and Augustinian values and mission.

After numerous students, faculty, and members of the general public expressed concerns over the cancellation, you clarified in a statement on February 22 that the decision to cancel was unrelated to Miller's sexual orientation and was based instead on "the explicit, graphic, and sexual content" of Miller's past performances.

This explanation is problematic. There has been no indication that Miller's workshop would have contained the type of graphic sexual content about which you are purportedly concerned. In fact, all signs point to the contrary. First, the description of the workshop strongly suggests that Miller would merely be acting as a facilitator for student participants who are designing their own pieces. Second, Miller has hosted similar workshops at religious institutions in the past, including at DePaul University, a fellow Catholic institution.

Moreover, the timing of the cancellation—long after the workshop was scheduled and long before it was due to take place, but in the midst of a firestorm of criticism over the university's decision to host it—creates the unmistakable impression that the university administration has decided to infringe on the academic freedom of its faculty for reasons of political expediency.

Though FIRE generally believes that a liberal policy of free expression best serves the educational mission of any university, we also recognize and respect the right of private, sectarian institutions to define their identities. Villanova, however, has made clear that academic freedom is an essential part of its identity, so the administrative cancellation of a faculty-initiated theater workshop because of speculative concerns about the content of the workshop (or worse, because of outside criticism of the university's decision to host the workshop because of past performances) betrays the university's commitment to academic freedom.

We ask that you reconsider your decision to cancel Tim Miller's workshop at Villanova University. To restrict academic freedom and freedom of expression is to risk stifling the free and open flow of ideas upon which higher education relies. If this is indeed your vision for Villanova, students and faculty should be candidly informed of this restriction so that they can decide whether or not Villanova continues to meet their needs as an educational institution.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Samantha Harris, Director of Speech Code Research
Foundation for Individual Rights in Education



Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship

cc:

The Rev. Kail C. Ellis, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Villanova University

The Rev. John P. Stack, Vice President for Student Life, Villanova University

Maurice L. Hall, Chairperson, Department of Communication, Villanova University

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