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Catholic university faculty rebukes president over academic freedom

Joshua J. McElwee | Dec. 7, 2012

The primary representative body of University of San Diego faculty has firmly rebuked the Catholic institution?s president, saying her leadership has created a ?climate of apprehension? and has been ?inconsistent with the mission of the university.?

The vote by the University Senate, which represents the institution?s seven colleges, came Thursday after weeks of dispute over president Mary Lyons? cancelation of a visiting fellowship for noted British theologian Tina Beattie.

Beattie, a theologian at London?s University of Roehampton known for her work in contemporary ethical issues, had been scheduled to begin a fellowship at the San Diego?s Frances G. Harpst Center for Catholic Thought and Culture on Nov. 6.

Lyons, who says the theologian publicly dissented from church teaching by suggesting Catholics could support civil same-sex marriage, canceled [1] the appointment Oct. 27.

Prominent theologians and academics in both the U.S. and the U.K. have criticized the decision, saying it represents a significant crackdown on academic freedom.

San Diego faculty and students have also said Lyons? reasoning for the cancelation has shifted over the past weeks, leaving unclear exactly what process the president followed in making her decision and what influence pressure [2] from financial contributors played in the move.

?The Senate finds President Lyons? decision ? and her evolving justifications for this action to be incompatible with the principles of academic freedom and shared governance, and inconsistent with the mission of the university,? reads one of three motions approved by the Senate Thursday.

Addressing the issue in a four page resolution composed of 23 clauses giving justification for their motions, the Senate also stated that:

- University donors ?must not limit or impede in any way? scholarship or teaching;
- No part of the university ?can be excluded or exempt from the protections of academic freedom?;
- The university?s ?international and national reputation was damaged? due to Lyons? decision;
- The decision may ?produce a negative impact on recruitment and retention efforts?;
- Lyons has ?created a climate of apprehension and distrust in which self-censorship has the potential to hinder academic thinking? and,
- The president has ?provided neither sufficient clarification ? nor any compelling justification for her decision.?

The vote of the Senate, which is a campus-wide group composed of faculty, academic deans and students, was 17 in support of the measure, four against, and three abstaining.

Amy Besnoy, the chair of the University Senate, said the vote reflects that the group ?felt it needed to say something? about Lyons? decision ?in light of the fact that there?s faculty upset, there?s student upset, and there?s question about what this means to the university?s reputation in the short term and in the long term.?

?The Senate is the most representative and the highest level of interaction that faculty have in a campus-wide view, so we needed to say something and we needed to affirm our commitment to academic freedom and shared governance,? said Besnoy, who is also an associate professor and science librarian at the university.

Julie Sullivan, the university?s executive vice president and provost and an *ex-officio* member of the senate who was present for the vote, said the university ?wants to find ways to strengthen our communication with all constituents of the university to ensure we have common expectations and that we engage in dialog.?

As part of that process, said Sullivan, Lyons has created a task force to look into what positions at the university should be considered ?honorary? and how to ?evaluate any appointments to those positions to ensure that if they?re institutional honors ? that they?re consistent with our university?s mission.?

In letters explaining her decision to cancel Beattie?s appointment, Lyons has stated that awarding the visiting fellowship Beattie would be akin to bestowing an honor on her. The Harpst Center?s director, Gerard Mannion, has disputed that claim, saying the fellowship was never described as an honor.

Prior to the Senate vote the university?s arts and sciences faculty had also firmly criticized Lyons? move, voting [3] in a meeting of their academic assembly Nov. 13 to approve a motion of no confidence in her leadership.

While the University Senate?s by-laws stipulate that actions taken by the group must be submitted to Lyons or the board of directors for approval or rejection, Besnoy said Thursday?s vote ?doesn?t impose any expectation of sanction? on the president.

The Senate chair said that before the vote there was a ?lively discussion? among senators. Some said junior faculty members have asked if they should now shy away from certain research topics in order to achieve tenure.

?This has been very hard on a lot of people campus-wide,? said Besnoy.

Several members of the university?s board of trustees refused to comment on the matter before the faculty vote Thursday, saying it would be inappropriate for them to discuss the issue.

Ron Fowler, the chair of the university board, said in a Nov. 16 letter to the university community that the board believe Lyons made the decision to cancel Beattie?s fellowship ?in good faith and with the best interest of the University in mind.?

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