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Providence College cancels guest lecture supporting same-sex marriage

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Providence, R.I.

Dominican-run Providence College said the provost's decision to cancel a guest lecture supporting same-sex marriage is "not really about academic freedom, but rather goes to the meaning of being a Catholic college."

"Should a Catholic college invite an outside speaker to campus, pay that person an honorarium, and give that person an unchallenged platform from which to present arguments designed to undermine a central tenet of the Catholic faith?" asked a statement Tuesday posted by the university on its website.

John Corvino, chairman of the philosophy department at Wayne State University in Detroit, was to deliver a lecture Thursday on "The Meaning of (Gay) Marriage," but more than a week before the talk Providence's provost, Hugh Lena, canceled it.

In an email to faculty and staff, Lena cited university policy that requires a two-sided debate on controversial topics. He explained the event's organizers were aware of the policy but gave the speaker who was to give a rebuttal to Corvino little time to prepare, despite having begun planning the event back in January.

The Catholic church opposes same-sex marriage. Church teaching upholds the sanctity of traditional marriage, between one man and one woman, and also teaches that any sexual activity outside of marriage is sinful.

"It is important to note that Providence College had originally agreed to host this speaker in tandem with another well-known philosopher for a two-sided debate of the issue of gay marriage," the university said in its statement.

"We believe that this kind of free and fair discussion of both sides of a controversial issue would be beneficial to our community," it said. "The event was canceled only when it became clear that this would not be the case. We would welcome a real debate about this issue on our campus and look forward to hosting an academic event that comports with our mission."

Some faculty and students saw the decision as a violation of academic freedom, and one campus group planned a rally to take place the date the lecture would have taken place. A Facebook posting urged students to "come fight for your academic freedom" and participate in a discussion on the event's cancellation.

News reports said history professor Fred Drogula, who is president of the Providence College Faculty Senate, planned to bring up the cancellation at the Senate's next meeting, Oct. 2, and discuss whether that body should issue a response.

The university said the cancellation was based on administration officials reading of "Ex Corde Ecclesiae" ("From the Heart of the Church"), an apostolic constitution issued in 1990 by Blessed John Paul II that outlines the identity and mission of Catholic colleges and universities and provided universal norms to ensure colleges

maintain these standards.

To have a one-sided presentation on same-sex marriage, it said, "would be to undermine the very nature of a Catholic college. Our interpretation (of 'Ex Corde') is in accord with that of the United States Bishops Conference, which has asked Catholic institutions not to provide honors or platforms for speakers who advocate for positions inconsistent with church teaching."

"We would welcome a real debate about this issue on our campus and look forward to hosting an academic event that comports with our mission," the statement said.

Lena, who is also senior vice president for academic affairs, told faculty and staff in his email that event organizers were aware of the school's policy requiring "a balanced presentation" and had had discussions with the administration as far back as January.

Nine campus departments and organizations were co-sponsoring the event and in February invited Corvino to speak on campus.

But "the event was not developed along the lines dictated by policy," Lena said, and organizers did not have final approval from the administration before sending a campus-wide email about it.

"As such, I have made the decision to cancel the event," he said.

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