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Working to stop student-union censorship

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Last week, a pro-life club at Trent University in Peterborough, Ont. was informed that the university's student union had refused to register their group. In explaining the decision, a student-union official declared: "Campaigning for pro life or pro choice is not allowed on campus ... since there is so many opinions to this it can lead to a very exclusive group, while all the clubs at Trent University must be inclusive. On campus we are not allow[ed] to have groups that take away rights or opinions of other people."

All of this would seem to fly in the face of Trent University's "Vision and Mission" statement, which calls expressly for a commitment to "free enquiry and expression."

The student union claims that "all the clubs at Trent University must be inclusive." But the Trent Muslim Students' Association and Trent NDP are presumably not entirely "inclusive" of non-Muslims and non-liberals (respectively). And they are not alone: By definition, any group espousing a doctrine, philosophy, creed or affiliation cannot be completely "inclusive" of those who disagree.

While pro-life students are banned from forming a registered campus club at Trent, they (and all students) are required to fund the feminist Centre for Gender and Social Justice, "dedicated to a politic of resistance," and providing (among other things) "feminist porn" and "safer sex supplies" for "all genders and sexes."

Other recipients of mandatory student fees include the Peterborough Coalition

Against Poverty ("direct action" for "social justice campaigns against regressive government policies"), the left-wing Ontario Public Interest Research Group, and the Trent Queer Collective, which opposes "classism, ableism, and fatphobia," as well as "all types of queerphobia." (Students can apply to have a portion of their mandatory fees refunded, but only by personally visiting the offices of the clubs they do not wish to support.)

The notion that one group's expression can "take away rights or opinions of other people" will remind Canadians of recent events at Carleton University, where seventh-year human rights student Arun Smith stole a make-shift "free speech wall" erected by the Carleton Students for Liberty. He described the wall itself, apart from any comments written on it, as an "act of violence" against "marginalized communities."

In his own mind, Mr. Smith was entitled to censor the "meaningless platitudes" and "abstract ideology" of his opponents (as he described them), who purportedly "ignore or perpetuate" gross suffering. Like Mr. Smith at Carleton, Trent's student union favours free expression for the views it likes and agrees with, and has no qualms about forcing students to pay for expression they abhor.

Student politicians should not have the power to deny certain groups the same accreditation enjoyed by groups that have a more politically favoured message. If a campus group complies with Canada's laws and with a university's reasonable regulations (applied fairly and equally to all

groups without discrimination), there is simply no reasonable pretext for student unions to deny permission to any group. And so why should student unions have that power in the first place?

Moreover, having all campus clubs raise their own money from people who agree with the club's philosophy — as opposed to being subsidized by fees levied against the general student population — would solve the current problem of students being forced to subsidize groups, ideologies and activities with which they disagree.

Indeed, a student union does not truly "fund" anything. The student union merely redistributes funds forcibly taken from students. Why not dispense with this illusion of student-union munificence?

Changing public policy will take many years, and a great deal of effort and energy. In the short run, the only option for the victims of discrimination on campus is to sue their student unions, and thereby force them to do the right thing.

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