

Dear Members of the Providence College Community:

Yesterday I met with about 60 of our students who marched through campus and eventually came to Harkins Hall. Their primary source of complaint was the content of a pair of articles recently published by a member of our faculty, how it made them feel, and their frustration that there had been no response from the College or me. After dialoging with the students, I believe it is imperative for me to respond to their concerns.

Academic freedom is a bedrock principle of higher education. It allows professors the freedom to teach, write, and lecture without any restraint except the truth as they see it. It also gives them the freedom to express their opinions as citizens so long as it is clear that they do not represent the views of the institution with which they are affiliated. This freedom obviously extends to espousing views critical of their own college or university.

So when one of our professors writes an article accusing Providence College of having “Succumbed to the Totalitarian Diversity Cult,” he is protected by academic freedom and freedom of speech. But it must be understood that he speaks only for himself. He certainly does not speak for me, my administration, and for many others at Providence College who understand and value diversity in a very different sense from him.

Universities are places where ideas are supposed to be brought into conflict and questioned, so let us robustly debate the meaning of “diversity.” But we must also remember that words have an impact on those who hear or read them. When a professor questions the value of diversity, the impact on many students, faculty, and staff of color is to feel that their presence is not valued and that they are not welcome at Providence College. I have heard from many students about the pain that this causes. When student activists are described as “narcissists,” they understandably feel demeaned and dismissed. We need to be able to disagree with each other’s ideas without attaching labels to them or imputing motives that we cannot know.

At the same time that we value freedom in the pursuit of truth, let us value even more our fundamental imperative on a Catholic campus: to be charitable to one another. We may deeply disagree on any number of topics, but we should do so in such a way that respects those with whom we disagree.

Our Catholic mission at Providence College calls us to embrace people from diverse backgrounds and cultures as a mirror of the universal Church and to seek the unity of that Body in the universal love of Christ. Pope Francis has likened this communion to the weaving of a blanket, “woven with patience and perseverance, one which gradually draws together stitches to make a more extensive and rich cover.” He reminds us as well that what we seek is not “unanimity, but true unity in the richness of diversity.” Finally, Francis reminds us that “plurality of thought and individuality reflect the manifold wisdom of God when we draw nearer to truth with intellectual honesty and rigor, when we draw near to goodness, when we draw near to beauty, in such a way that everyone can be a gift for the benefit of others.” Amen.

Fr. Brian Shanley