

Why I'm wearing white

Brant Bonetti | Posted: Sunday, January 29, 2012 8:39 pm

Beginning last spring, Vanderbilt began implementing a new non-discrimination policy that undermines the integrity of many student religious organizations. As a student leader in one of these organizations, I had a front-row seat to the drama that unfolded behind closed doors as many in the religious community attempted to dialogue with the administration. Like so many others, I was dedicated to pleading the case of religious life — but only in private.

Then I received the chancellor's email last week and something inside of me snapped. I realized that the rest of the Vanderbilt community deserves a more accurate picture of what had been transpiring privately for so many months. So this is a public plea. A public and passionate plea for myself and any other student who wants the opportunity to make choices for religious organizations based on their religious beliefs.

It's that simple.

Yet, throughout this process the university has consistently obscured the facts in an effort to gain acceptance for a policy that is widely unpopular amongst those it will affect. I'm going to try to clear up a few of those facts, and then I'll go on to explain what I believe.

From the beginning, Vanderbilt has denied crafting a new, more expansive non-discrimination policy. Instead, administrators have tried to convince us this is actually a case of a few organizations being asked to conform to a longstanding practice.

According to this story, various offices are finally "catching up" with a policy that has been in place across the university all along. But no matter how the facts are framed, the reality is that the student organization handbook was altered last December, when a section specifically protecting religious association was removed, as highlighted by *The Hustler* in September 2011. Then, in April, a number of organizations were placed on provisional status as constitutions that had been easily approved in previous years were evaluated under this new standard. Call it a policy change or call it "catching up." Either way, something changed. And that change will have real consequences for student organizations.

So far, the refrain echoed by a variety of university officials is that for all intents and purposes, business will continue as usual. But in a meeting with the Interfaith Council last Tuesday, Dean of Students Mark Bandas went so far as to admit that religious organizations could come under investigation if there was suspicion that members used religious criteria in voting for their leaders.

Let's say that you're a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and that you're running for president of the organization. You win the election, but the student that you beat feels that he lost because members of the organization cast their votes based on his religious beliefs. According to Bandas, Vanderbilt would have grounds to investigate your organization for discrimination if the other student lodged a formal complaint. That hardly seems like business as usual to me.

Many students and administrators have also asked why students who don't agree with an organization's beliefs would try to lead that organization. Do I actually believe that an atheist student would want to lead Navigators? No, I don't believe that "hostile takeovers" are a real threat. But that doesn't make this new policy viable. One main reason being that it exposes religious organizations to other threats.

What if a student leader goes away for the summer and has a change of beliefs? And if she doesn't believe in the shared values of the organization, how can she lead people in putting those beliefs into practice? Under the new policy, asking her to step down qualifies as discrimination, yet keeping her in that leadership position undermines the integrity of the organization. This is only one example of the kind of catch-22 this policy creates for religious organizations.

There has also been a lack of transparency about which groups this policy will affect. While it is still unclear who will be kicked off campus in April, members of several groups have expressed their opposition to the implementation of the policy, including members of: Vandy Catholic, the Baptist Collegiate Ministry, Navigators, CRU, Beta Upsilon Chi, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, the Asian-American Christian Fellowship, Bridges International and the Lutheran Student Fellowship, as well as graduate organizations like the Christian Legal Society, the Medical Christian Fellowship and the Graduate Christian Fellowship.

The current narrative also fails to represent the concern of hundreds, if not thousands, of parents and alumni from across the country who have called, written and recently purchased radio ads expressing their discontent with Vanderbilt's new policy. This is not a case of a few rogue groups flaunting a well-established and accepted policy; this is a story of Vanderbilt enforcing a new, aggressive policy that has been met with widespread resistance from across the Vanderbilt community.

At various times the administration has also argued that they must enforce this new reading of the non-discrimination policy to protect Vanderbilt's federal funding. This claim holds absolutely no weight. In a letter sent to the chancellor and the board of trust in December, six prominent law school professors, including the director of Stanford's Constitutional Law Center, expressed their "collective opinion that no court decision, administrative regulation or federal or state statute requires Vanderbilt to prohibit religious student groups from requiring their leaders to share the groups' religious beliefs."

On numerous occasions the university has also advanced the argument that this new interpretation of the non-discrimination policy is necessary to protect students against discrimination based on their sexual orientation. Yet, even if you believe Vanderbilt's previous policy allowed for discrimination against LGBTQI students, this sweeping new restriction on religious association is overly broad. Protecting LGBTQI students does not require the kind of policy that prohibits members of religious organizations using religious beliefs to choose their leaders.

But let's look past the administration's position. Here's what I believe.

I believe that groups that challenge beliefs and promote dialogue are critical components of Vanderbilt University. I also believe that groups that exist to support members in expressing their commonly held convictions are essential for a healthy campus community. Some groups aspire to meet both purposes, some focus on one over the other - and I believe that an institution like Vanderbilt should promote and encourage both kinds of communal expression.

Vanderbilt's new non-discrimination policy undermines those groups with common interests, especially communities that meet to express commonly held religious beliefs. By preventing students and organizations from choosing leaders based on principles of faith, administrators are charting a new course that inhibits student efforts to create communities that can adequately meet their needs. This new policy also prevents students from maintaining the purpose and integrity of their communities over time. As Supreme Court Justice Alito wrote in a recent 9-0 ruling for the high court regarding religious association, "a religious body's right to self-governance must include the ability to select, and to be selective about, those who will serve as the very 'embodiment of its message.'" That same right is necessary for religious groups at Vanderbilt to accurately represent and adequately serve students.

Over my four years here, members of various religious organizations have supported, strengthened and stretched me as person. Organizations like BYX, the BCM and Navigators have truly changed my life, and I know that religious organizations of all types have contributed in important ways to the lives of hundreds of other students at Vanderbilt. So tomorrow I'll be wearing white to express my love for Vanderbilt, my conviction that religious students should be allowed to make decisions in religious organizations based on their religious beliefs, and my hope that this new policy will be changed in order to protect religious life for future Vanderbilt students. If you share the same feelings, I'd love to have you join me.

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