

Calgary Herald

MRU is a venue that cherishes free speech

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A recent op-ed published in the Calgary Herald erroneously suggested that Mount Royal University would learn a costly lesson from its approach to free speech. It's unfortunate that unproven allegations were presented as facts. The column does, however, give me an opportunity to discuss the important issue of free speech on university campuses.

Mount Royal University's goal is to help students see that the world is not black and white, but many shades of grey. Our job is to open their minds and teach the skills of critical and independent thinking that will follow and serve students throughout their adult lives. Diversity of opinion is a crucial tool in teaching this lesson.

Our job is not to turn a socialist mind into a neo-conservative one, or to convert a young future Stephen Harper into the next Jack Layton. We are not here to indoctrinate, but to expose students to various world views that inform and challenge their own opinions. The tension this sometimes causes is a necessary discomfort that, from the safety of the classroom, leads young minds to deeper thought and understanding. It leads to the development of stronger, more confident ideas that either reinforce their existing opinions or cause them to develop new beliefs.

Mount Royal also welcomes rigorous

debate outside the classroom. We routinely facilitate groups and individual visitors who use our campus as a venue to speak and be heard. Events range from demonstrations to displays on Main Street promoting various causes and awareness campaigns.

Just last week, Mount Royal hosted a talk by Nate Phelps of the very controversial Phelps family, labelled "the most hated family in America." Nate is the son of Fred Phelps, the founder of the controversial Westboro Baptist Church. In a talk he called Leaving Hate Behind, he addressed the church's strong hatred, particularly of homosexuals. The event, held peacefully at the Leacock Theatre, was organized by a student group, the Secular Humanists of SAMRU. The stated goal of the Secular Humanists is "to create an inclusive environment, promoting freedom of speech, creativity, skepticism and garnering the desire within students to question all things."

Such diversity on campus creates a positive space for students who have nothing in common to rub shoulders and get on a first-name basis. That familiarity leads to an appreciation of those who are supposedly "different" and fall outside the accepted, societal norms, but who are no less an important part of our society.

Mount Royal policies governing the use of

space on campus are carefully crafted so that employees and officials are never in a situation where their personal opinions or biases can bear weight on the process.

What Mount Royal does require is that all students, groups and visitors from the general public notify us in advance if they wish to come on campus, so that we can facilitate a successful and safe visit or event. If we know in advance someone wants to set up a controversial display or distribute material that some may deem offensive, we can make arrangements to ensure children aren't exposed to anything that is age inappropriate. We operate a conservatory and house a daycare - just two examples of reasons for minors to be on campus.

Examples of "offensive" material we allow on campus abound, but I will look no further than our student newspaper. Like all university newspapers, our students regularly push the envelope and run controversial stories.

As the university president, I have been contacted by people who find the content offensive and want me to do something about it.

I often agree with them. I, too, have found some of the content offensive. What I find more offensive, however, is the thought that I, as university president, could somehow censor and stop it from being published.

Mount Royal specifically has no policy that bans offensive materials. What we have is a policy that allows people to respond and complain about material they deem offensive. That's what free speech is all about, the debate and the opportunity to

agree, disagree or agree to disagree.

What's important from our perspective is that individuals have a safe and respectful environment in which to present their views, particularly when those views are controversial.

David Docherty is president of Mount Royal University.

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