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Experiencing “Transgenderism” on Religious Campuses

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On many fronts, the courts are weighing in on the extent to which religious institutions of higher education can follow their faith-based missions. Recent *rulings* [1] respecting “transgendered” students have granted some exemptions to religious colleges who have set limits on students who choose to live their life as a gender opposite from that in which they were born.

The Cases

In the first case, a student applied to, and was accepted by, California Baptist University as a woman, but later publicly revealed that “she” was a transgendered male. The judge ruled that the university was within its rights as a religious institution to expel the student, but at the same time stated that the university could not bar the student from public spaces or online programs. The judge reasoned that some places and programs, such as the library, counseling center, art gallery and online courses “have little or no values-based component ... [and] do not require participants to adhere to any moral code of conduct.” In this case, the university’s standards and behavioral code were accepted, but limited by the judge’s opinion about what was, and was not, material to its religious identity. While on the surface this may seem to have some rational basis, it completely fails to recognize that for institutions that take their religious identity seriously, there is no area in which their values are extraneous. For such institutions, their values are an integral, indivisible part of all that they are. Such values touch every program, every space and every person—with many institutions having explicit behavioral *contracts* [2] and *policies* [3] for their faculty and students.

In the second case, the U.S. Department of Education (“DOE”) rejected a complaint filed on behalf of a “transgender” student (who identifies as a male) whom George Fox University (“Oregon’s Nationally Recognized Christian University”) refused to let reside in male student housing. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 bars gender discrimination by educational institutions, and the DOE has recently *stated* [4] that Title IX covers transgender

students. GFU offered the student a private room, but the student claimed that “he” should be entitled to live with male friends just as other male students have that right. The student’s lawyer is quoted as stating that the use of such exemptions “will do a lot of harm... [The students] will be abused.”

Shane Windmeyer, executive director of *Campus Pride* [5] (an organization that serves LGBT student leaders and campus organizations working to free campuses of anti-LGBT prejudice, bigotry and hate) wrote that it is “frightening...that any private college is now encouraged to use ‘religion’ as a means to justify discrimination.” (quotes in the original) He goes on to claim that transgender students face threats of harassment and physical violence: “At the end of the day we must remember this is an issue of safety for transgender young people.” This statement reflects a standard view that people who do not experience themselves as their biological gender are subject to a number of uncomfortable situations on a typical campus, including difficulty accessing healthcare, navigating their residence halls and utilizing locker and restroom facilities.

While undoubtedly some persons experience negative reactions—and *several* [6] colleges have taken steps to try and address some of those instances—it is unclear that the incidents described above (i.e., abuse, bigotry, hate, violence) are common occurrences. Rather, a digital search of “danger to transgender students in college” reveals a number of accounts in which students were uncomfortable and distressed by events on campus, but few accounts of *violence* [7] or abuse.

From the data, it appears that while those who disagree with the case rulings above present their arguments in terms of abuse, violence, and safety, the real issue is much more simple: they are offended. They don’t like the universities’ policies.

Of What Virtue?

Certainly, any policy by a Christian institution (or any institution, for that matter) should be implemented in a manner that protects all persons’ right to live safely, and any boundaries necessary to that end should be firmly established on the virtues: charity, kindness and compassion among others. Acts of violence and bigotry, when they occur, must be roundly condemned and reparations made. But what of “non-offensiveness” as a virtue? For sure, there is a place for sensitivity in civilized society, and community living requires a respect for human differences. Yet, this, too, has limits—limits that have traditionally been defined by *natural law* [8], a naturally-knowable and universally-binding law of right and wrong. One’s gender identity, based upon one’s biological sex, would have clearly fallen into this type of naturally-known limit for many centuries. The phenomena of gender confusion is not new, but what *is new* is the idea that this confusion is anything but disordered and something needing intervention and healing.

Unfortunately, gender bending isn’t the only fundamental issue facing shifting opinions with dire consequences for our culture today. Take for example, the issue of proper human sexual interaction and procreation. In generations past, it was taken for granted that sexual coupling and childbearing was reserved to marriage between a man and a woman. Although same-sex marriage is capturing the headlines these days, it is important to consider that the *real shift* [9] began a half-century ago when promiscuity began to be more-widely accepted. Slowly but surely, the shift took place whereby it became “offensive” to “judge” a person who was exploring his or her sexuality prior to marriage, and some even suggested that such exploration was

a healthy advancement beyond the “sexual repression” of the past. What has come with this shift? Increasing numbers of children without two parents, and the *dire consequences* [10] that follow.

The normalization of behavior that violates natural law is dangerous; these universities are taking a difficult but laudable stand against the current cultural drift by being clear and unapologetic about their values. Acquiescing to the demands of a limited number of students in opposition to a school’s core values paves the road to confusion and chaos for the remainder of our young people (not to mention the assault on their own sensibilities).

There is no *essential conflict* [11] between non-discrimination and upholding one’s values. President Michael Lindsey of Gordon College, a liberal arts college that “retains its roots in the Christian faith” and which also has come under *scrutiny* [12] for requesting an exemption, summarizes the issues well: “We have never barred categories of individuals from our campus and have no intention to do so now. We have always sought to be a place of grace and truth, and that remains the case. As a Christian college, we are all followers of Christ. As long as a student, a faculty member, or a staff member supports and lives by our community covenant documents, they are welcome to study or work at Gordon.”

Freedom on campuses in the United States is fundamental; such freedom is not, however, rampant license for forcing upon others one’s own predilections. Instead, it is freedom within the boundaries of the community which one joins. No person is compelled to attend a college or university that has values and goals at odds with those that he or she holds. But, when he or she chooses to do so, the virtue of integrity demands that he or she do so with the intent of accepting the education sought, on the terms on which it is offered—with the intent of accepting, and giving back. Such giving involves fostering the mission of the school, upholding its values, and yes, even growing and changing on a personal level.

[1] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/07/14/two-legal-cases-illustrate-growing-tensions-over-rights-transgender-students>

[2] https://www.greenville.edu/about/foundational_documents/lifestyle_statement.html

[3] <http://www.huntington.edu/about/community-life-agreement/>

[4] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/29/settlement-favoring-transgender-student-has-implications-higher-ed>

[5] <http://www.campuspride.org/about/>

[6] <http://www.transgenderlaw.org/college/guidelines.htm>

[7] <http://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1351&context=elj>

[8] <http://culture-of-life.org/blog/whatever-happened-natural-law>

[9] <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2012/the-sexual-revolution-and-its-victims>

[10] <http://www.frc.org/family-structure>

[11] <http://culture-of-life.org/e-brief/when-individual-choice-impacts-community%E2%80%A6what-rights-are-right>

[12] <http://www.gordon.edu/article.cfm?iArticleID=1625&iReferrerPageID=5&iPr evCatID=30&bLive=1>

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