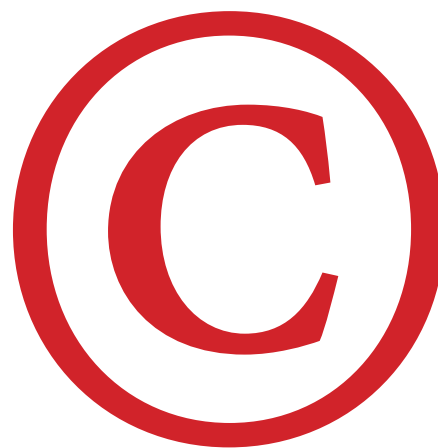


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UVSC serves a vital role as a public, secular institution

David R. Keller
Salt Lake Tribune

Surprisingly, the controversy of Michael Moore speaking at Utah Valley State College did not die with the departure of Moore's limousine to the airport or even with the re-election of George W. Bush.

Rather, the issue continues to flare up in different ways in different places and raises serious questions about the role of public institutions of higher education in homogenous communities.

At the end of the fall semester, the UVSC student body academic vice president, who was instrumental in bringing Moore to campus and who withstood intense pressure to cancel the event, was forced to resign after making public comments about a book he is writing on the experience. This predictably has caused concerns on campus about academic freedom.

This all transpired while litigation was pending against UVSC by a plaintiff who earlier had tried to buy the cancellation of the sold-out event with a \$25,000 cashier's check. Citing the student leader's resignation, the plaintiff dropped the lawsuit in an apparent gesture of victory.

Apprehension among UVSC faculty about academic freedom was not placated by the recent firing of an overtly liberal political science professor from Southern Utah University. Reasons that might justify the action have not been made public, but the facts that this instructor was honored as 2003-04 Professor of the Year and recently delivered the university's Distinguished Faculty Lecture only add intrigue.

For some UVSC faculty, this intrigue turns to alarm taken in the context of the Orem plaintiff's contention that taxpayers who aim to inculcate conservative values in their children should not be paying the salaries of "liberal" professors. Defending the legal action against UVSC, he explained, "the most liberal of the leftist liberals . . . are the people that we in Utah County . . . were trying to keep out of here."

Unfortunately, this attitude is directly antithetical to the principles of pluralistic democracy and fails to recognize the role and responsibility of public education, which the founders of this nation repeatedly emphasized.

That UVSC does not strictly model its educational program on the normative standards of the surrounding community evidently foments the ire of many local taxpayers who see UVSC's proper identity as a sort of publicly accessible satellite of Brigham Young University.

Such a view fails to acknowledge the obvious fact that while BYU's central mission, as a private ecclesiastical institution, is the exploration of reason within the framework of faith, UVSC's central mission, as a public institution, is the exploration of faith within the framework of reason.

The private-sectarian/public-secular distinction creates obvious challenges for UVSC given the geopolitical realities of Utah County. Despite such handicaps, President William Sederburg has noted and affirmed the intrinsic dissemblance in the aims of the two schools.

The affirmation of UVSC's public mission has fomented criticism from community members who seemingly fail to recognize that, as a practicing Lutheran, Sederburg is not likely trying to foist a secular humanist agenda on the faithful. Rather, he simply recognizes the proper place of public education in an open society.

If it is agreed that democracy cannot function without an enlightened citizenry, that public education teaches critical thinking skills required of citizenship and that public schools serve as forums for civic dialogue, then public education is absolutely essential to government of the people and by the people.

The UVSC-Moore controversy demonstrates that public institutions of higher education must resist the

temptation to capitulate to economic and political expediency. The importance of UVSC to Utah County is directly proportional to the homogeneity of the community it serves.

Given the fact that Utah County is perhaps the reddest county in the reddest state of the union, that importance is beyond estimation.

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