

Remarks by Mr. Collins, Senior Dean
September 10, 2007

Good morning, everyone.

At the end of last year, about half of the student body participated in a BISSNET survey on the climate of the school. I'd like to talk about that survey and what we're doing as a community to address the issues it raised. First let's consider the title: a survey on the "Climate of the School." What does this mean? Most simply, it refers to how comfortable you feel within our school community—both on campus and at school activities. And let me stress that you have a right to conditions that will allow you to feel safe and secure at school. The survey showed that many of you don't. Just over a third of survey respondents reported that they sometimes or frequently hear racist, sexist, or homophobic remarks at school. The survey also showed that the overwhelming majority of these remarks referred to another student's weight and appearance or supposed sexual orientation. Perhaps most disturbingly, about a third of those who participated in the survey were uncertain that a faculty member would do anything about such remarks if they were reported.

Well, we are doing something about it. We take this issue very seriously. But before talking about what we're doing, I'd like to address the idea of harmful speech more broadly.

On August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. In that speech, he declared that it was his dream that one day people would "not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

Please keep this in mind as you listen to what follows. King was obviously referring to the problem of racism, but I think that his commentary on how we judge each other encompasses all kinds of hateful or demeaning speech.

You may have heard that in response to this problem in our school, we are tomorrow going to take the symbolic action of burying some of the hurtful words and slurs that people use against each other. When this public demonstration was proposed, some reacted negatively and called it a kind of censorship. I think it's false to set up free speech and harmful speech as two mutually exclusive alternatives. To explain why, I'd like to take up the question of exactly what a person is doing when he makes hurtful remarks or uses belittling speech.

The French political philosopher Claude Lefort refers not only to a right to speak, but also to a right to listen. Here's how the argument works: Before the modern era, there was no such thing as free speech. The question, then, is why does this right arise with the modern era? Well, prior to the modern era, everyone was held in their place in the social order by their rank or station, in other words, that rank was what and who they were. For example, in the Middle Ages, a peasant was a peasant and a duke was a duke. During that period, it would have been absurd to say that it was a "hate crime" to call a peasant a peasant. That's what the person was.

But then at the start of the modern period, roughly the early 1600s, René Descartes systematically stripped all inherent qualities from beings, including human beings. You may be surprised to find that a philosopher could do this all by himself, but he did—or rather he reflected changes in human society that were happening at the time, and what followed was an age of revolutions (including ours) and of the declaration of human rights. It's at this point that people develop the concept of a right to free speech. And why? Because in the modern era, it's no longer sufficient to know *what* someone is. We no longer think of people as "whats," as peasants or dukes, for example. In the modern era everyone shares the status of being an equal member of

a community. So now people have to speak to give an account of themselves, to tell *who* they are. And that's why the right to speak also implies a right to listen, to find out who someone is, to hear the qualities a person claims for him- or herself.

Okay, the philosophical lecture is over, but now we're in a better position to answer the question of what you're doing when you make hurtful remarks. When you do so, you're telling another person, "I'm not going to give you the right to speak. I don't want to listen to you talk about who you are. Instead, I'm going to categorize you. Even if my assumptions about you aren't accurate or fair, I'm going to define you by your looks, your race, your sexuality." You're telling the person that, according to you at least, he or she doesn't belong in our larger community. You're not even giving that person a chance.

You may think this isn't a big deal. But I've listened to ninth-grade girls report that they'd been called a slut or a whore. I've seen the fear on a ninth-grade boy's face when he's called a fag by an upperclassman. That's a lot for a fourteen year old to handle—to be labeled, to be told what he or she is. That's a lot for anyone to handle. And students should not have to "handle" such remarks in a school where they do in fact belong, where they do in fact have a right to feel safe and secure.

So we're going to bury some words. That's not censorship. It's a symbolic act. It's taking a stand. It's saying that in our community, we're not going to label people. Instead we're going to listen. We're not saying that our community will be perfect, that everyone will get along. We reserve the right to judge people by the content of their character, but we'll give them a fair hearing first. We won't exclude them by calling names, and labeling, and refusing to listen.

You'll notice that in this talk I haven't given you any real incentive to stop using hateful speech. If you're a person who wants to do that, you'll find ways to do it, when there's no teacher around, when you think you can get away with it. As I said, this isn't censorship. But remember, you're also being listened to. You're being judged by the content of your character. By using hateful or demeaning speech, you're defining who you are.

That's an ominous note to end on, so I'll add one more detail from the BISSNET survey. Over 62% of students who responded to the survey reported that they'd *never* been harassed at school. That's cause for hope. We're a stronger, closer community than we think. Let's keep welcoming and including all our members. Let's keep listening to each other.

Thank you.