

ACADEMIC AND ARTISTIC FREEDOM

William J. Hynes, President of St. Norbert College

“Do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold onto the good.”
(Paul the Apostle, First Letter to the Thessalonians, 5: 20-21)

“For here we are not afraid to follow Truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error, so long as reason is left free to combat it.”

(Thomas Jefferson, Letter to William Roscoe, December 26, 1820 concerning the founding of the University of Virginia)

St. Norbert College is proud to be both a Catholic and American institution of higher learning. Along with the great medieval Catholic theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas, we hold that, as a Catholic institution, that we have a particularly deep sense of freedom. We know that there can be no inherent conflict between the beliefs of faith and the discoveries of reason. In fact, if there is an apparent conflict it is because one or both is not yet being done correctly. As Cardinal John Henry Newman observed, “To change is human, to have changed often is to become perfect.” In contrast to many public institutions, Catholic institutions can have an even greater freedom because we can discuss such topics as religion and spirituality.

One of the key principles of a solid liberal arts education, particularly a Catholic one, is to define our terms, examine matters first-hand, hear controversial speakers speak for themselves, view provocative artistic performances, read directly challenging texts, and weigh this direct experience against secondary interpretations – just to name a few examples - so that we know what we and others are talking about. Because an undergraduate student needs to understand first-hand good philosophy from poor philosophy, true reasoning from false reasoning, real affirmation of the dignity of all people from mere nominal affirmation, this same young adult needs to examine carefully and critically texts and artistic forms that embody these philosophies, reasonings, and affirmations.

In his *Catholic Universities: Ex Corde Ecclesia*, the late Pope John Paul II wrote: “By means of a kind of universal humanism a Catholic University is completely dedicated to the research of all aspects of truth, in their essential connection with the supreme Truth, who is God. It does this without fear but rather with enthusiasm, dedicating itself to every path of knowledge, aware of being preceded by him who is ‘the Way, the Truth, and the Life’ ...”

St. Norbert College is not only a Catholic college, but also an American institution of higher learning. Accordingly, we therefore strive to honor the demands of both

traditions, and we deeply believe that these traditions mutually support each other. We encourage deep respect of all human being, a vigorous exchange of ideas, and a diversity of persons and perspectives.

The “testing” of ideas – even those that we may find repugnant – has a long, rich history in American higher education and the Catholic Church. It is for these reasons that St. Norbert College subscribes both to the American Association of University Professors’ *1940 Statement on Academic Freedom*: “The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition” ; and to the statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops: “Academic freedom is an essential component of a Catholic university.” At the same time, we are committed to teach the authentic teachings of the Church.

At St. Norbert College, we offer an important opportunity for all our students and the broader community to explore ideas and artistic creations. In an age of increased polarization – when some encourage us to shun those with whom we disagree or to replace dialogue with monologue – it is vital to provide a setting in which ideas can be heard, freely explored and debated.