

Our Affiliation With FIRE and Our Political Identity  
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(Originally posted for the Facebook.com group)

I thought it would be appropriate to discuss our group's affiliation with FIRE and political position in depth. I have heard that some people worry FIRE is a conservative group, and, since I am fairly conservative myself, some people suspect FIRE was chosen for ideological reasons. This is not true.

I started this group to get political discourse on campus elevated past political identity. No matter how one identifies politically, there will be speech that they disagree with. What I want is an open campus where all viewpoints are tolerated, regardless of whether those viewpoints disagree with Marywood's Catholic values or with a particular group's point of view.

Everyone will have to sacrifice in order to achieve this ideal. That's why true tolerance isn't easy. It's much easier to think that other viewpoints should not be heard because they are hateful, ignorant, misinformed, or just plain old wrong. But who gets to decide what is hateful, ignorant, misinformed, or just plain old wrong? It's easy to demand that your group's point of view be tolerated, but what happens when someone with an arbitrary power over speech disagrees with you? Therein lies the rub.

In order to make sure that every student in this group and on Marywood's campus is always protected in their speech, we need a speech code that does not discriminate on the basis of the speaker's viewpoint and contemplates the difference between individual and institutional speech. Luckily, we have a great model for such a code: The First Amendment of the US Constitution. This Amendment was one of the greatest achievements of our civilization because it understood that people will be offended in a democracy and that the best way to deal with differences is through dialogue, not censorship.

Marywood currently does not enforce the First Amendment on their campus (as a private institution, they are not obliged to); rather, they let their catholic identity or the politically correct dogma of the day define what type of speech is appropriate for students and faculty. This is both arbitrary and unbecoming of an institution of higher learning. Students should be appalled at an institution of high learning that thumbs its nose at the most important vessel of truth and inquiry: free speech.

FIRE offered to help us because they recognize that this is a problem, not only at Marywood, but at many schools around the country. Far from being a conservative organization, FIRE is probably the single most principled free speech advocacy group in the country. They have board members from the ACLU and their director is a self-identified pro-choice liberal, yet they consistently defend student groups of all different political stripes based on their belief that college campuses ought to embrace the First Amendment, not banish it.

I have posted in the messages section a link about some of the "liberal" cases FIRE has helped with, and there are also many "conservative" cases they have aided as well. I suggest everyone follow the link ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foundation\\_for\\_Individual\\_Rights\\_in\\_Education](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foundation_for_Individual_Rights_in_Education)) posted [by a member of our group on our facebook.com group's message board] to their wikipedia page, as it is actually a pretty fair snap-shot of their organization. Simply put, FIRE is as non-partisan as is possible in a highly partisan country, and I hope that this group can continue to follow their example and support real free speech on our campus, not just free speech that any particular political group condones.

In the upcoming months, there will be a big battle on our campus and possibly in the local and national media about what type of speech policy a private college like Marywood ought to embrace. As I've stated, I think the choice is clear, and I urge those who agree with me to take as active a roll as possible in this group and invite their friends. FIRE will support us, but without the ground swell of student support that this issue deserves, we will merely be leaving the change for future students to pursue, and leaving in place an antiquated and arbitrary set of speech limitations that we should be embarrassed to go to school under.

Anyone who browses the roster of this group can see that it has no political identity or agenda. That's how I intend to keep it. I am fighting for nothing more than the policy linking speech on campus to the basic protections of the First Amendment and I hope you will all continue to discuss and support this effort.