

Student Perspectives Series
Autumn Quarter, 2016

Summary of Discussion

The Student Perspectives Series (SPS) is a new initiative coordinated by the graduate and undergraduate liaisons to the Board of Trustees in partnership with the Office of the University Secretary and Campus and Student Life. The SPS is designed to give small groups of students and University trustees an opportunity to have off-the-record, in-depth discussion on topics of mutual interest. Student participants are selected by the student liaisons and the three to four trustees who attend are drawn from an appointed pool. Views presented by the trustees in these meetings are their own and do not represent the Board as a whole.

The inaugural meeting of the SPS took place on November 3, 2016. Two discussion topics, divestment and freedom of expression, were identified ahead of time by the undergraduate liaison who also invited the eight undergraduate students who participated.

The first half of the meeting was spent discussing how the Board of Trustees evaluates possible “exceptional instances” to the principles set forth in the Kalven Report.¹ The students were especially interested in understanding the Board’s approach in the context of climate change. The significance of the Kalven Report as a statement of values and principles as opposed to a policy and process document was touched upon, as well as the ways in which matters of importance to faculty and students are brought to the Board’s attention and under what circumstances. Assuming that a social or political issue does come to the Board for discussion, there was interest among the students in knowing what would be considered an actionable exception to Kalven. It was pointed out that many issues could be viewed as endangering humanity (e.g., reliance on nuclear power, the pervasiveness of firearms in American society, legal tobacco sales), and that any consideration of action by the University on these and other social or political issues must take into account the precedent that would be set along with the significance and impact of the action on the University in the decades ahead.

The remainder of the meeting focused on freedom of expression at the University and reaction to Dean John Boyer’s essay on academic freedom and its cover letter from Dean of Students Jay Ellison, which was sent to the College Class of 2020 in September. There was general agreement that shouting down speakers and otherwise preventing the free expression of ideas are not acceptable at the University. It was also pointed out that trigger warnings and safe spaces had not been the focus of student demands in the recent past, so seeing them highlighted in the letter was

¹ The Kalven Committee’s Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action is available on the Provost’s Office website: <http://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt.pdf>.

surprising; in fact, the availability of safe spaces and trigger warnings was thought by some present to be conducive to free expression through classroom discourse in which all students can participate freely and fully with advance preparation. The trustees were interested in knowing if the students' experience in the College supported or contradicted the ideas presented in the letter. Students shared that they have felt welcomed and supported in their courses and on campus in general. However, some expressed feeling disconnected from the administration writ large and also harbor some reservations about being truly free to express their views at times out of fear of being perceived as fitting the negative stereotypes of millennials, and that this burden disproportionately impacts students from marginalized groups. The discussion closed with general agreement that the use and definition of terms are critical – and that overall, students, faculty and administrators are landing on the same page more frequently than they might think on the values underlying the University's commitment to free expression, diversity and inclusion.