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The University of Calgary has taken legal action against the Campus Pro-Life protest held on campus grounds.

WHAT HAPPENED TO FREE SPEECH ON CAMPUS?

JOHN CARPAY

Should a public university, funded by taxpayers, be able to censor controversial speech on campus? According to the University of Calgary, the answer to this question is a resounding “yes.” In spite of its stated mission to “seek truth and disseminate knowledge,” and in spite of advertising itself as “a place of education and scholarly inquiry,” the University of Calgary has charged some of its own students with “trespassing” because they set up a pro-life display on their own campus this past November.

It wasn’t always so. In 2006 and 2007, the University of Calgary erected signs stating that the pro-life students’ large colour photographs of aborted fetuses were permitted under the Charter’s guarantee of freedom of expression. On six separate occasions, the pro-life campus club has erected its provocative display without incident, using it to engage other students in debate.

But in 2008, the University of Calgary wholly abandoned its commitment to free speech as a means of pursuing truth, and demanded the pro-life students erect their signs “facing inwards” — so that passers-by could not see the signs. While the university

the students. But two months later, the university instructed Calgary police to deliver summons to these same students — privately at their homes, with no media present.

This aggressive censorship flies in the face of the university’s *raison d’être*, not to mention the long-standing Canadian tradition of tolerance for the expression of all views.

In cases dating back to the 1930s, the Supreme Court of Canada has made it abundantly clear that the purpose of freedom of expression is to protect minority beliefs which the majority regard as wrong. The major-

text. Long before the Charter, the Supreme Court acquitted a Jehovah’s Witness of seditious libel for distributing a pamphlet entitled “Quebec’s Burning Hate for God and Christ and Freedom Is the Shame of All Canada,” which contained offensive statements about Quebec society, the clergy and the courts. Even if some listeners perceive it as hurtful, polemical speech plays a crucial role in public debate.

Charter rights aside, the University of Calgary holds itself up as a tolerant and open place of inquiry. So, unless the university alerts the public of an official policy against pro-life speech on campus, it cannot deny equal freedom of expression to all of its students.

Moreover, the university has expressed no qualms about other controversial large colour displays, including ones showing the effects of torture on political dissidents in China, the cruelty of animal testing and the consequences of spousal abuse. It seems gory and disturbing displays on campus are fine — as long as they do not convey a politically incorrect view on abortion.

The University of Calgary receives over \$500-million from taxpayers each year. If it does not reacquaint itself with the ideals of tolerance, it may find taxpayers becoming less tolerant of footing such a hefty bill to support an institution which so blatantly disregards its own mission.

“It seems gory displays are fine at the University of Calgary — as long as they aren’t pro-life

ity is not permitted to impose its perception of “truth” or “public interest” by silencing the minority.

For example, in the case of *Edmonton Journal vs. Alberta*, the Supreme Court of Canada declared it “difficult to imagine a guaranteed right more important to a democratic society

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described its demand as a "reasonable compromise," the practical effect was akin to total censorship.

Students ignored the university's threats of arrest, and even expulsion for "non-academic misconduct," and erected their controversial display again this past November. Under the watchful eye of numerous media cameras, the university did not arrest

than freedom of expression. Indeed, a democracy cannot exist without that freedom to express new ideas and to put forward opinions ... The concept of free and uninhibited speech permeates all truly democratic societies and institutions."

The Canadian tradition of tolerance extends to polemical speech that is considered extreme in its con-

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will return