

An Open Letter to Chancellor Zeppos

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE, thefire.org) was disappointed to learn via your January 20 statement that Vanderbilt is abandoning America's pluralistic tradition by banning religious and political student groups from making leadership decisions based on their religious or political beliefs. You state that "membership in registered student organizations is open to everyone and that everyone, if desired, has the opportunity to seek leadership positions."

We understand that you are holding a "town hall" meeting to discuss Vanderbilt's decision. At this event, students will likely wish to hear answers to questions such as these about the ramifications of the university's policy:

- **If one of the leaders of Vanderbilt's Muslim Students Association were to convert to Christianity, is the group required to maintain that person in his or her leadership role despite the fact that he or she is no longer Muslim?**
- **Vanderbilt informed the Christian Legal Society that its requirement that student leaders "lead Bible studies, prayer, and worship" was against the policy because it implied that these leaders must hold certain religious beliefs. How do you suggest religious groups at Vanderbilt fulfill their purposes without leaders who can accomplish such core tasks of religious leadership?**
- **While this dispute was originally confined to religious organizations, your statement of January 20 states that *all* student organizations must accept *any* student as a member or a leader. If a group of straight students—the majority at Vanderbilt—were to join the Vanderbilt Lambda Association, vote themselves into office, and disband the group or alter the group's mission, what recourse would LGBT members of the Lambda Association have?**
- **If a member of the College Republicans joins the College Democrats in order to discover their plans for political activism and report those plans back to the College Republicans so as to thwart them, do the College Democrats have any way to stop him or her?**
- **Under this policy, must an ideological student journal like Vanderbilt's *Orbis* accept editors or publish columnists who disagree with, mock, or denigrate its progressive political views?**
- **Many groups in the Occupy movement choose to make decisions by consensus. How could a Vanderbilt-based Occupy group operate if a small group of students joined specifically to prevent the group from acting in any way by always preventing a consensus from forming?**
- **If a student were to join an environmentalist group like Vanderbilt SPEAR and then used his membership in that group to increase his or her credibility when publicly criticizing the group's positions in the Nashville or Vanderbilt newspapers, what could the group do to prevent this?**

FIRE, which wrote you of these concerns last September but received no response, was not alone in its concern. Twenty-three members of the United States Congress, the national Christian Legal Society, Vanderbilt law professor Carol Swain, Roman Catholic Bishop David Choby of Nashville, and many others warned Vanderbilt that a decision to deny religious or political groups the right to require that their leaders believe in the group's mission would severely impair the rights of Vanderbilt students.

Indeed, Vanderbilt promises that students "are entitled to exercise the rights of citizens," yet the university's decision now forbids them from doing so. Vanderbilt students now have fewer rights than their counterparts at the University of Tennessee—or their friends from high school who chose not to attend college at all.

We hope that you will provide honest and thoughtful answers to these important questions.