

A Letter to Administration

By: Anonymous

Dear SNC Administration,

On September 18th, the student body received an email from Dr. Joe Webb informing us that the college's language surrounding gender identity would be updated to better reflect the church document, *Dignitas Infinita*, that had been released the prior spring. We were told in this email that the changes were “in response” to the church's message and that the administration's “commitment to supporting each and every member of our community remains unwavering.”

As critical-minded students, we have not blindly accepted the statements above and for good reason. We value our fellow students' experiences, well-being and safety. We know that when an institution that is supposed to support its members decides not to affirm their identity, it creates unnecessary burdens for these individuals, making the space that was supposed to protect the dignity of all complicit in its undermining. It is because of our concern for our fellow students and their well-being that we have examined the language in the September 18th email, investigated this administration's motives and written this response. For this reason, we feel it is imperative to let you know that we do not stand with the recent statement and following changes, and, most importantly, we are afraid to believe you when you tell us that your motivation behind these changes are solely religious, or that no substantial changes will come from the shifting language.

First, nowhere in *Dignitas Infinita* does the Catholic church call for any action from educational institutions to retract their inclusive policy, language-based or otherwise. The actions of St. Norbert College are of their own volition, not an order, a request or even a suggestion from official church guidance. The assertion that the changes are in response to the document *Dignitas Infinita*, poses the shift in policy as a religious issue rather than a reaction to the recent challenges to Title IX. It has not escaped our attention that the new protection of gender identity in Title IX enacted by the Biden administration has been halted across the United States by a

district court case in Kansas. The motivation of the administration is clear, as the position of the church toward gender identity has been accepting and using inclusive language for nearly a decade. The changes in this case are more closely correlated with the challenge to Title IX, not a religious shift as is being argued by administration. This purposeful shift perpetrated solely by this administration is clear as Catholic institutions across the United States have chosen not to act and change their policy. Notre Dame, Georgetown and Marquette, just to name a few, have made no move to change their policy on gender identity; schools such as Georgetown have, instead, enhanced their commitment to all of their students regardless of gender identity.

Administration has also told us that their commitment to their students remains unwavering and that the community of this school will not be impacted. However, we have already seen the changes and felt the shift in our community. The physical changes that we have seen on campus have been minimal and cosmetic. We were told beforehand about the language on campus websites and have watched as the signs on campus have changed from “Gender Neutral Bathroom” to simple “Restroom” signs—a shift we are understandably not thrilled about during a time of drastic budget cuts and rising cost of admission. It is not these cosmetic changes that are bothering us—we do not care if we are using a gender-neutral bathroom or a restroom. We care that this “community,” this administration, was so uncomfortable with these small aspects of campus—the small aspects that brought members of our community comfort—that they felt the need to change them.

It is for the reasons mentioned above that we are angry. This email represents the voices of the LGBTQ+ students on campus, friends and allies of those individuals, but most importantly, your constituents. We are upset not only because we believe that the changes have been misrepresented, but also because this is a purposeful change of course, and it has betrayed the trust of your students. There is no legal change or religious document forcing this administration to make these alterations—it is the administration's own actions to remove language that was there for the sole purpose of making community members more comfortable.

In response to these changes, members of the SNC community hosted a panel discussion. This panel was a space for students to talk about the changes we have seen and the sadness we have felt watching this administration purposefully act in a way that distances themselves from their own students, using religion as an excuse. After the panel, Fr. Dougherty (who had been invited to the discussion but declined) was interviewed by NBC26. During this interview, Fr. Dougherty reiterated that no changes had been made to on-campus resources, called the discussion dishonest and claimed that he asked organizers of the event to meet directly with Norbertines rather than host an open discussion. We would like to address these statements made in the interview to administration directly, starting with the statement that no changes are being made to on-campus resources.

We as students agree that no services have been removed or changed for students based on their gender identity. We would like to reiterate our concerns above, however, about how our sense of community has been damaged by the willingness of this administration to shift small services that were here for the sole purpose of inclusion, and tell administration bluntly that keeping the services they provide and promise their students, regardless of gender identity, is the bare minimum. Changing the school's policy on gender identity was a choice, keeping the services that were promised to your students should be a given.

Another claim made by Fr. Dougherty during his interview was that the event held by students was dishonest. Not only did Fr. Dougherty deny the invitation to this event, and is therefore basing his statements on the interviews of a handful of students completed and compiled by NBC, but is misunderstanding the message of this event. This panel was a chance for students to voice their concerns openly and listen to the insight of experts on the subjects mentioned above. There was no dishonest information given by the panelists or the students, only thoughts and fears over the future of this institution. Any information decided by administration to be false could only be due to the lack of information provided to us about what the future of this school entails.

In addition to calling the event dishonest, Fr. Dougherty told NBC that he invited organizers of the event to a direct meeting with Norbertines to talk more about the shifting policy. After talking with the organizers of the event, it is clear that no one was invited to the meeting he was talking about.

Once again, we are your constituents and we are asking that you reverse course and value the presence of all students on campus. Your actions have made us feel unwelcome and have clearly displayed the regression of this college. Many of us are ashamed to call this our school and have dropped minors, majors, classes and study abroad plans to make sure that we can transfer or leave as quickly as possible. Those who have not plan to cut ties with this school entirely after graduation. It is not too late to reverse course and refuse to give in to the outside pressures that are changing this institution for the worse.

Listen to us,

The Student Body