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Faculty circulating letter of support for Trustees

by Jeff Beebe

In an attempt to crystallize solid faculty backing for the trustees' decision to allow the Maine Gay Symposium, several UMO faculty members are circulating letters of support to be signed by university employees.

The movement began Friday at a faculty meeting proposed by philosophy instructor Robert H. Craig. Less than 10 faculty members and several members of the Wilde-Stein Club were present at the meeting.

Craig had originally hoped for a statement both supportive of the trustees' civil rights stand and decrying the discrimination being suffered by the WS-C, but the two issues were separated at the meeting.

"There really are two issues here," said Prof. Bill Stearns of the Math Dept. "There's the right of personal freedom and then there's the homosexual issue. The average guy in the street unfortunately lets the homosexual issue overpower the other one.

"If somehow we could make a distinction between the two and pick only the individual rights issue, I think we would be better off," he proposed.

"I don't want to come to grips with a personal opinion for or against the group," explained Stearns. "I don't think that's the big issue."

The former chairperson of the UMO gay group argued that support for the gays was necessary in view of the pressures they were under. Before leaving to attend a New England gay gathering at Emerson College in Boston, he replied to Stearns' proposal.

"When you have people who are being discriminated against, stereotyped, and profusely put down, their rights are violated and they live in fear," the spokesman said. He argued that nobody at the meeting could comprehend what it means to be gay in Maine or gay on this campus.

His efforts to gain support for the Wilde-Stein Club were blocked by Prof. George Cunningham, who focused the efforts of the meeting on a defense of rights, instead of a defense of homosexuality.

Mathematics professor Bill Stearns emphasizes a point as George Cunningham looks on at Friday's meeting of several faculty members. They drafted a letter in support of the trustees' civil liberties stand in regard to the Wilde-Stein situation.

Bob Craig

"I am willing to stand up and be counted when I see a case of someone's rights being violated, but (I hear) only the wild allegation of somebody's rights being violated in the nebulous somebody somewhere sometime somehow by somebody’s on the basis of..."

And I would like to go on the record on this one," he continued, "to affirm the rights of the ignorant, beknighed, bigoted people of the state of Maine to manage their own affairs."

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Cunningham provided the average Maine citizen view of the situation as "an issue of flagrant teaching of immorality to their boys and girls—this was the issue as they saw it and not one of the right to speak or rights of that sort. "We have a great tendency out of our superior wisdom as faculty members," he surmised. "to look down and say 'you benighted people, you savages, you don't realize if you had the proper intellectual viewpoint you wouldn't hold these views.'"

Cunningham concluded strongly in favor of free speech, telling the spokesman: "If in fact somebody doesn't like it, that's their privilege and I'm going to stand up for their right not to like it just as I'll stand up for your right not to like the fact that they don't like it."

History professor Dave Smith spoke of one trustee who told him before the vote on the gay symposium that they planned to "teach President Neville that afterward that the State of Maine is a civilized place to live in," because Neville was not entirely in agreement with the board's decision.

Smith argued in favor of a letter supporting the trustees, saying "maybe some of us here who feel very strongly that Maine is a civilized place to live, or has that potential, and it has ever since I was born, ought to support the board in their unpopular stand."

Brooks Hamilton, journalism professor and executive editor of WMEB-TV's "Maine News and Comment", agreed. Hamilton has editorialized a number of times on the air in support of the trustees. "I'm up there and well-known for having foot and mouth disease," commented Hamilton, a 2-year veteran of university politics. "And I would like to hear a few of the out loud voices of the faculty."

The letter now being circulated was drafted for the group by Prof. Howard Schonberger, the Wilde-Stein Club's faculty advisor. It reads as follows:

To Dr. Lawrence Cutler, chairman of the Board of Trustees:

We, the undersigned administrators, faculty, and staff of the University of Maine at Orono, commend the decision of the Board of Trustees permitting the Wilde-Stein Club to hold a symposium on homosexuality on the Orono campus next month.

The action of the trustees, taken on behalf of one group within the university community, strengthens the constitutional freedoms of speech and assembly for all.

Smith mentioned a growing trend of faculty members registering for the April gay symposium scheduled for Hilltop Commons, and paying the $5 fee regardless of whether they plan to attend. Smith, who will pay but not attend because he will be in Denver, said "whether they're (faculty) here or not, I think this is one way they can personally show solidarity and I think they should do so."

Chemistry department chairman Jim Wolfhagen, who had opposed "raising another flag" in the controversy, said he plans to register and attend some of the seminars at the symposium.