April 25, 2017

Dear members of the campus community,

Many of you are aware that Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), a registered and formally recognized Gettysburg College student organization, recently asked Student Senate for funding to support a presentation by Robert Spencer on our campus. Robert Spencer is director of Jihad Watch and the author of numerous books on jihad and Islamic terrorism. After a thoughtful discussion, Senate approved YAF’s request. Senate’s decision follows their policies and processes and was made in the spirit of supporting freedom of speech and a campus environment that includes a wide variety of perspectives, some of which may be divisive and even offensive.

After consultation with a variety of campus individuals and groups and outside law enforcement agencies, the College has affirmed Student Senate’s decision. However, I want to be clear that approving the presence of a speaker does not imply that the College endorses the views that speaker might have.

There are many of you who support the decision to bring Robert Spencer to campus and others who do not support this decision. This issue is difficult because it pits two core institutional values against one another:

- the free and open exchange of ideas and the exploration of their ethical and spiritual dimensions; and
- the commitment to a diverse and inclusive learning environment.

Our freedom of expression policy states:

“Gettysburg College subscribes to the wisdom in the words of Justice Louis D. Brandeis: ‘If there be a time to expose through discussion the falsehood and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence.’ (Whitney v. California, 274 U.S. 357, 1927)”

In the spirit of this philosophy, there will be two speakers on campus next week who will present different views regarding Islam.
First, the Religious Studies Department and the Peace and Justice Studies program will sponsor a lecture by Todd Green, Associate Professor of Religion at Luther College, on Sunday April 30, at 7:00 p.m. in Mara Auditorium, Masters Hall. Dr. Green is a nationally recognized expert on Islamophobia and his lecture will focus on “Professional Islamophobia.” Then on Wednesday, May 3, at 7:00 p.m. in the CUB Ballroom, Robert Spencer will make his presentation on “The Political Ramifications of Islamic Fundamentalism.”

Based on the controversial nature of the topics being presented and the information we have received from law enforcement agencies about the potential for outside disruption or protests, we have decided to make these events available only to those who show a valid College ID at the door. Backpacks will be prohibited and all hand-carried items will be subject to search.

Next week will give us an opportunity to test our community’s ability to hear and respond constructively to two very different views on an important issue. I have great confidence in the ability of our students, faculty, and staff to listen to and debate thoughtfully a point of view that may not only be counter to theirs, but which they might also find to be offensive. We understand that this is a particularly challenging time for the Muslim members of our community, and I trust that we will offer them our reassurance, encouragement, and support.

Let me conclude by saying that when I am confronted with controversy, I often return to our institutional values. As we complete the semester, I ask you to do the same. In particular, let us lift up and embrace the first of those values: the worth and dignity of all people.

Sincerely,

Janet Morgan Riggs
President