13.8: Vassar’s creative response to hate speech

KEY QUOTATION (From a Vassar student and alumni “counter-protest” website):

“The Westboro Baptist Church has announced that they will picket Vassar College on Feb 28th. In response, we are raising money for the Trevor Project, ‘the leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth.’ Our goal is to raise $4,500, or $100 per minute that the WBC is planning to protest for.”

Editor’s note: By the time of LPR publication today, the Vassar counter-protest website has raised over $93,000.
13.8 FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Vassar’s creative response to hate speech

We were intrigued by an article in the February 14, 2013 issue of *Inside Higher Education*: “Vassar Uses Anti-gay Protest to Raise Funds to Help Gay Youth.” The fund-raising idea described there will be high on our list of creative ways to respond to hate speech without censorship:

Westboro Baptist Church, known for turning up at locations nationwide for anti-gay protests, has announced plans to rally at Vassar College (or as Westboro calls it ‘Ivy League Whorehouse Vassar College’) later this month. The church plans a 45-minute protest against Vassar, which it calls a ‘filthy institution … wholly given over to the fag agenda.’

Jon Chenette, acting president at Vassar, sent a campuswide letter inviting students and faculty members to respond to the inflammatory statements in ways that would ‘celebrate the inclusiveness of our community and the multitude of backgrounds, interests, and preferences that enrich our experiences.’

*Inside Higher Education* reported that Vassar students and alumni created a counter-protest webpage to raise funds for the Trevor Project, which “provides counseling for young gay people who may be facing crises or thinking of suicide.”

The webpage states:

The Westboro Baptist Church has announced that they will picket Vassar College on Feb 28th. In response, we are raising money for the Trevor Project, ‘the leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth.’ Our goal is to raise $4,500, or $100 per minute that the WBC is planning to protest for.

So far, the web-based “counter-protest” has raised over $93,000.

The Vassar example brings to mind the 1991 Harvard University Confederate flag controversy. Tensions arose when a student displayed the Confederate flag from her residence hall window, describing it as a symbol of “Southern pride.” Harvard officials declined to punish the student, or order the flag removed. Its continued presence motivated other students to respond in generally
creative and positive ways, including a mult-ethnic group that gathered in silent protest in the residence hall quadrangle. Most of the protesters interviewed by the *Harvard Crimson* refused to call for official censorship. One said "I certainly support the right to put up a symbol to express a point of view, but I'd like people who put up symbols to appreciate the substance of the symbol" ("Seventy March Silently from Kirkland to Cabot to Protest Confederate Flags," March 9, 1991, p. 1). The tone of the protest--organized by groups including Hillel and the Black Student Association--was presaged by a pertinent *Harvard Crimson* editorial with a descriptive title: "Censure, Not Censor," (March 4, 1991, p. 2).

Harvard University President Derek Bok then published the following statement in the March 15, 1991 *Harvard University Gazette*:

> Although it is not clear to what extent the First Amendment is enforceable against private institutions, I have great difficulty understanding why a university such as Harvard should have less free speech than the surrounding society--or than a public university, for that matter. By the nature of their mission, all universities should be at least as concerned with protecting freedom of expression as the rest of society. Like the rest of society we should also worry about who will draw the lines and how wisely they will be drawn if we begin to restrict the bounds of permissible speech...

> In addition, I suspect that no community can expect to become humane and caring by restricting what its members can say. The worst offenders will simply find other ways to irritate and insult. Those who are not malicious but merely insensitive are not likely to learn by having their flags or posters torn down. Once we start to declare certain things 'offensive,' with all the excitement and attention that will follow, I fear that much ingenuity will be exerted trying to test the limits, much time will be spent trying to draw tenuous distinctions, and the resulting publicity will eventually attract more attention to the offensive material than would ever have occurred otherwise" (p.1, 4).

[end of LPR issue #446]