The Straits Times online Forum Page  
Nov 8, 2007

Booklet on gays: SMU should support students’ mature actions, not restrict them

WE REFER to the letter, 'Allowing SMU students to launch booklet, event on gays sends wrong message' (Nov 3), by Ms Low Xiang Jun as well as various other letters responding to this matter.

Ms Low raised an important and valid point about the role of tertiary educational institutions in Singapore. SMU's mission is to develop socially responsible leaders and innovators who will help shape the future of Asia.

Fundamental to this mission is our commitment to provide students, faculty and staff an intellectual forum for open discourse and dialogue, even on controversial matters. The highest aim of education is not to teach students what to think, but to teach them how to think - critically, rationally and creatively. We encourage students to express their views, but equally important, to recognise and respect the views of others, which may differ widely from their own.

In this instance, a group of undergraduates has developed a project aimed at giving a voice to an under-represented group by sharing their stories. Their purpose is to educate and promote understanding - not to advocate a particular lifestyle, but rather to provide insight that will enable their fellow students to develop a more informed perspective. This is not inconsistent with the objectives of the 'Leadership & Team Building' course.

Ms Low may wish to note that the group has stated very clearly in the publication that the members are 'not representative of gay activism' and many of them 'come from backgrounds that neither condone nor promote homosexuality'.

The intent of their publication is neither contentious nor divisive. The group has stated that they are only presenting voices which are 'real and come from real people'. Readers are given the latitude to form their own views and opinions.

The university should support such mature and sensitive actions on the part of its students, not restrict them. Our role is to respect and protect open dialogue and learning, permitted that the means employed to create awareness do not infringe university regulations or the laws of Singapore.

Professor Howard Hunter  
President  
Singapore Management University
Allowing SMU students to launch booklet, event on gays sends wrong message

I AM writing in with regards to the article, ‘SMU students launch booklet, event on gays’ (ST, Oct 31).

As an ex-student of the Singapore Management University (SMU), I am shocked and saddened to see such an open activity in one of the premier institutions of higher learning in Singapore.

The role of an educational institution in Singapore is not only to impart knowledge, but also to equip students with the skills and the right values to face challenges of society.

Students at this age are particularly impressionable and it is during this stage that what they learn and absorb stay with them and create an impact that lasts into their working life. Therefore, I feel that tertiary institutions should take care and carefully guard their educational systems from such negative values and influences.

Although homosexuals should not be discriminated against, by allowing such a book launch to take place, the school is sending a signal that such an alternative lifestyle is condoned. The irony in this issue is that the publishing of the book and the launching of it is being organised as part of the Leadership and Teambuilding module, the very module that aims to train leaders and teaches the students to be socially responsible citizens. The question then is, are we truly teaching the students to be socially responsible if they publish such a book, in which the ideas are against the values of the majority conservative Singaporean society?

While SMU boasts of an educational system that is similar to colleges in the United States, the liberality given to the students in the United States is unlike that of Singapore students. This is because Singapore is, after all, still a mainly conservative society. Therefore, I feel that what the US universities allow as part of their school culture should not be adopted wholesale into Singapore. Instead we should pick out the best areas and remove the unwholesome influences in the system.

The founders of SMU started off the university with wholesome ideals. Whether or not these ideals are going to continue to remain and create a positive impact on the students’ lives, and perhaps the future of Singapore, will depend on how much we are willing to protect the university system from the detrimental influences of the world.

Low Xiang Jun (Miss)
The Straits Times online Forum Page
Nov 6, 2007
SMU students’ launch of booklet on gays: We need to be more open-minded

I AM writing in reply to Miss Low Xiang Jun’s article, ‘Allowing SMU students to launch booklet, event on gays sends wrong message’ (Online forum, Nov 3).

Miss Low wrote to disapprove the launching of a booklet, done as a project by SMU first-year students, that discussed the discrimination faced by homosexual youths in Singapore. She said that the book launch condones an alternative lifestyle and will create a negative impression on the values of SMU students.

I am a conservative but I must disagree with her words.

I strongly believe that a university should be an environment within which any perspective and idea can be discussed. In that setting, our learned faculty will provide necessary guidance. For university students, this is the time to learn about the world and be exposed to new ideas and thoughts. We should understand that there are individuals within our society that pursue an alternative lifestyle. The project was a booklet that sought to discuss the issue of homosexual prejudice as well as to facilitate understanding. It was not a parade that cajoled students into turning gay.

Being in a conservative society does not mean that we should isolate ourselves from what some may believe to be negative influences. While we must hold fast to our values, we do not gain from being insulated.

The liberality in United States colleges is not something granted to its students. It is a culture of tolerance born from a society that has grown and learned from a history of prejudice and racial segregation. I believe that this culture is a mark of strong values and ethics and is not an unwholesome symptom of a decayed moral compass. We are entitled to our views as conservatives but as members of a plural society, we must seek to understand others who may hold differing beliefs on sexuality, religion, politics, philosophy and so on. Let us come together and agree to disagree.

Seeking to understand the people we may disagree with draws the fine line between tolerance and ignorance. I believe that SMU students, being socially responsible citizens and future leaders understand that tolerance is a necessary ingredient for harmony and peace. I also believe that we will continue to uphold this value with pride.

Ahmad Firdaus Daud
President
SMU Students’ Association
Singapore Management University

MISS Low Xiang Jun, in her online letter, had condemned SMU’s decision to allow their students to publish a booklet and hold an event on gays.

I take particular exception to her view on how SMU should treat its students. She appears to imply that universities should impart ‘right values’ and ‘wholesome ideals’ and suppress those to the contrary, and that being ‘socially responsible’ implies conforming with the views of the majority of society.

Universities are institutions that should first and foremost emphasise intellectual and moral integrity. To dictate to university students what views they should take and what values they should hold not only undermines the process of intellectual and moral discovery, but also insults the maturity and the intelligence of the top 25 per cent of our school cohort.

I have no doubt that the SMU students in this case are acting on their intellectual and moral conscience, which is the responsibility of citizens in a democracy. Singapore is a democracy and students, like all citizens, have the right to express their views, regardless of what the opinion of the majority may be. Going by her flawed argument, the unpopular but necessary policies of the Government such as CPF reform would be ‘socially irresponsible’.

Indeed, instead of dismissing divergent viewpoints from our own, we should critically consider their merits and demerits and seek to question our own assumptions, and through that process form more enlightened and considered conclusions. And the ability to do so is exactly what a university education should impart.

Matthias Yong Peng Chew
Cambridge, UK
Homosexuals should know that change is possible

I REFER to the letter, 'SMU students launch booklet, event on gays' (ST, Oct 31), where a booklet containing stories of young gays, lesbians and bisexuals was highlighted. The sadness and desperation portrayed by 'Fairus' in one of the stories has prompted me to respond.

While Mr Leonard Ng encourages more gays and lesbians to come out, he fails to understand that some of them, like Fairus, just do not want to remain gay. As someone who has had my fair share of sexual confusion, I fully empathise with Fairus and those like him, who do not want to remain gay, lesbian or bisexual.

I want to tell Fairus, and others like him, that change is possible for homosexuals. However, the degree of change depends on the motivation of the one seeking help, and the support that is given to him/her.

In Singapore, recovery support groups, such as CHOICES, do exist to help homosexuals and lesbians in overcoming unwanted sexual desires and behaviour. Although no one chooses to be a homosexual, one can certainly choose not to remain one. Unfortunately, very few people know that change is possible, but it is.

Shawn Tay Liam Yaw