

Catholic universities put potential speakers through vetting process

WASHINGTON - Commencement season has arrived and the controversy over President Barack Obama's scheduled address at the University of Notre Dame's May 17 graduation ceremony has drawn a spotlight onto the end-of-the-year festivities at Catholic colleges nationwide.

Though officials at some U.S. Catholic colleges and universities have said Obama would not have made it through their selection process to receive an honorary degree or serve as commencement speaker, others said he probably would.

All those interviewed by Catholic News Service said candidates considered to deliver the commencement address at their college - or to receive an honorary degree - must meet specific criteria.

"We do respect President Obama for the position he is in, and if he would be so inclined to come here to discuss issues of the day, we would love to have him here for an academic exercise," said Rosalie Mirenda, president of Neumann University, a Catholic institution in Aston, Pa., that recently achieved university status. "But he probably wouldn't make it through the vetting process we have for selecting a commencement speaker."

Notre Dame has a long history of U.S. presidents delivering the commencement address at their graduations, but none created the uproar that Obama has inspired.

More than 50 U.S. bishops have blasted Notre Dame for inviting the president to deliver the commencement address and receive an honorary degree because he supports legal abortion.

Many cited "Catholics in Political Life," a 2004 document of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which states: "The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions."

Some Catholic groups have called for the invitation to be revoked, while others have staged daily protests at the Catholic school's Indiana campus for weeks.

Holy Cross Father John I. Jenkins, Notre Dame's president, remained firm that he will not rescind the invitation and university officials expect graduates will enjoy a memorable commencement ceremony.

Those are the kinds of memories that Jesuit Father Charles H. Allen, executive assistant to the president of Fairfield University in Fairfield, Conn., said could potentially overshadow the achievements of the graduates themselves.

That is why his college shies away from inviting politicians as commencement speakers.

"That time is for the students," Father Allen said. "Having a controversial speaker just upsets the graduation."

Though Fairfield's president, Jesuit Father Jeffrey von Arx, makes the final selection for commencement speaker, a university screening committee develops a list of potential honorary degree recipients, which must be approved by the board of trustees, Father Allen said.

The selection committee also sends Father von Arx a list of speakers the members would like to see considered to deliver the commencement address, but those candidates must meet specific criteria, Father Allen said.

The speaker must have some kind of connection to Fairfield, must be a dynamic orator and must pass the controversy-free test, he said.

At Xavier University in Cincinnati, anyone can submit a nomination for commencement speaker or honorary-degree recipient, but those recommendations go through a series of hurdles before a selection is finally agreed upon by the board of trustees, said Laurel Bauer, a spokeswoman for the university.

"Generally, candidates should have attained local, regional, national or international stature which should show notable accomplishments in any of the university's academic disciplines, business, government, law, medicine, public service or

religion,” Bauer told CNS. “We do take into account their stance on certain issues and consider the impact on the university and any controversy that may arise.”

Some Catholic universities shy away from speakers who have well-known opinions that are contrary to church teachings, such as support for legal abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, same-sex marriage, birth control and the ordination of women.

Other Catholic institutions of higher education invite speakers who support those controversial causes, and have drawn harsh criticism, even sometimes from the local bishop.

Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes of New Orleans announced in April that he would boycott the May 9 graduation ceremony at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans because political commentator Donna Brazile – a supporter of legal abortion and contraceptive practices – will be the commencement speaker and receive an honorary degree.

“I recognize that Ms. Brazile is a Catholic Louisiana native who has worked effectively in service to the poor and African-Americans in particular,” Archbishop Hughes said in a letter to Xavier’s president, Norman C. Francis. “However, her public statements on the abortion issue are not in keeping with Catholic moral teaching.”

Using a single issue – like a position on abortion – as a litmus test to be honored at a Catholic university is a troubling concept for Nancy Dallavalle, an associate professor who chairs the religious studies department at Fairfield University.

“Are we going to start asking everyone who comes to speak at our campus what their position is on abortion?” Dallavalle asked. “If that’s the case, should we start asking them a series of questions about all aspects of Catholic teachings? If we start doing this, will anyone be worthy to speak at our schools?”

The Jesuit-run University of San Francisco was recently criticized after the school announced it would have Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, South Africa, who has criticized abstinence-only programs and supports condom use by those infected with or at risk of contracting HIV and AIDS, as its undergraduate commencement

speaker.

“At its best, the Catholic ethic is one of involvement, not avoidance,” said Gary McDonald, a spokesman for the University of San Francisco.

“The pope frequently welcomes and receives in audience those with whom he profoundly disagrees,” McDonald told CNS. “We would do well to follow the example of Jesus in his embracing all segments of society.”

Offering ideas from a broad spectrum of personalities is also an important component when St. Peter’s College in Jersey City, N.J., invites speakers to address students at its graduation ceremony, said Jamie Bredehoft, a spokeswoman for the college.

“We have many different audiences to consider, mostly students and alumni,” Bredehoft said. “But, at the end of the day, our Jesuit tradition of educating the whole person and exposing our students to many different ideas and religious faiths will always be a big factor when our president chooses a speaker.”