

DIALOGUE&LETTERS

Diversity welcome at Butler

It's no accident that political debates, presidential policy speeches and campaign rallies frequently occur on university campuses. For centuries, universities throughout the world have thrived as places that invite and, yes, sometimes incite discussion. This is not simply our charge; it is our responsibility.

Serving this essential function in society can be misunderstood. When a controversial speaker's comments are reported in the media, those opinions are often attributed to the university where the speaker appeared. The truth is that there is no university orthodoxy.

Academic institutions strive to be hospitable forums wherein intellectual and moral positions can be examined. It is through investigation and argumentation that understanding progresses. Universities have a fundamental obligation to keep the conversation going by entertaining divergent opinions. Limiting or censoring that conversation is antithetical to any university's identity.

Often the free exchange of ideas grows heated, and people can take offense. But the alternative, censorship or limitation of ideas and expression, directly contradicts the essence of a university. The same protection that allows any person to state



Fong

MY VIEW

Bobby Fong

an opinion that might be offensive guarantees us all the right to express our own ideas and convictions and to disagree with that person's position. To take away one person's right to free speech inevitably compromises our own freedoms.

Presenting a balanced, diversified slate of speakers and artists is a challenge that we aspire to meet. Each year, Butler University welcomes more than 150 renowned authors, artists, anthropologists, politicians, entertainers and scientists to campus. The majority of these presentations are free; all are open to the public.

Recently, an Indianapolis Star story on Harry Belafonte's appearance as part of the Celebration of Diversity Distinguished Lecture series provoked several letters and calls questioning the university's commitment to provide an equivalent forum for alternative views. As a matter of fact, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice was invited to be part of the same series this year; she declined because of the demand of her administrative duties. The next speaker

in the series is Shoshana Johnson, an African-American soldier who was captured and rescued during the Iraq War.

The university does not determine which speakers the media will cover. In the last two years, we have welcomed Steve Forbes, Lee Hamilton and Mitch Daniels to our campus. On the



Harry Belafonte

programme.

Nonetheless, constructive comments and suggestions for improvement are welcome. My only request is that these comments be made after attending the lecture or presentation in question. Unfortunately, reading or viewing a brief story about an event can sometimes be misleading and provoke a response that communicates anger rather than insight.

The Butler community looks forward to building upon our tradition of welcoming speakers from diverse backgrounds. Many viewpoints, some controversial, will be expressed in order to inform and inspire the conversations that remain at the heart of our mission.

■ Fong is president of Butler University in Indianapolis.

same day as the Belafonte lecture, Butler sponsored an appearance at the Economic Club of Indianapolis by Jim Morris, head of the United Nations World Food Programme.



Shoshana Johnson