A prudent response to the Chapel protest

The Administration responded prudently to the walk-out by gay, lesbian and bisexual students from a Catholic mass at Goddard Chapel by issuing a warning to the students, rather than punishing them. This is a welcome change from the past practice of meting out punishments to students for something they did not know was prohibited, as occurred in the T-shirt case last year. The Administration response also signals a shift away from making simple offensiveness a disciplinary infraction. In the chapel case, the Administration faced the difficult task of balancing freedom of worship with freedom of expression, and it performed well.

The Administration’s proclivity toward punishing people for actions they had no way of knowing were wrong, or for actions that offended another person’s norms, undermined the students’ confidence in the equity of Tufts’ disciplinary procedures. If the Administration continues to approach disciplinary matters in a more reasonable manner, it will earn the students’ trust.

At the Dec. 10 protest, eight students wearing T-shirts marked “Silence=Death” walked out of Catholic mass at Goddard Chapel holding hands during communion. According to the students’ statement, they were protesting what they perceive as the Church’s silence on the issues of AIDS, condom use, and violence against gays. Regardless of the merits of the protesters’ argument, Catholics might be angry at them for leaving the Chapel in such a visible manner during one of the most sensitive parts of the mass. The students said that they did not intend to disrupt the mass, but their protest was noticeable and may in fact have disturbed those attending mass. The Administration also considered the protest as a disruption of the service. Those attending the service could argue that their freedom of worship was violated by the protest. While these arguments are understandable, the fact remains that the protesters followed all the published rules of conduct at Tufts. They should not be punished for violating rules that did not exist.

Religious services at Tufts should be protected from disruptions. Those attending religious services should abide by the customs of the services or at least practice common courtesy. President Mayer’s statement on freedom of worship and Dean Knable’s warning to the students clearly shows that future protests at religious services will be considered a disciplinary infraction. This statement gives fair warning to all students. Free expression does not guarantee its practitioners an audience; and certainly not an audience exercising its right to free worship.

In this case, the Administration has also dropped its practice of disciplining students simply because they offended someone. The chapel protesters’ actions were probably offensive to many. But mere offensiveness should not constitute harassment or a breach of the disciplinary code. However, in a case last semester, a student was punished for yelling the phrase “Aunt Jemima” to a friend he said was wearing a bandanna. A woman passing by felt the remark was directed at her as a racial epithet. A disciplinary panel found that the student should have anticipated that his remark could have offended someone passing by and was therefore blameworthy. Fortunately, the Administration abandoned this standard of anticipating offensiveness in the Chapel decision.

Some may ask whether the Dean of Students Office has applied a double standard when “at-risk” groups are not punished for offending some people when a white student was punished previously for such an action. It now appears that the Dean of Students Office has changed its policy and is no longer using a ludicrously broad definition of offensive behavior. However, it remains to be seen whether this is an actual policy change. The Administration’s commitment to this policy change will not be proven until it is applied in future disciplinary cases.

The Administration’s decision in the Chapel incident should be reassuring to both worshipers and free expression advocates at Tufts. But the changes in Tufts disciplinary policy, as reflected in the Chapel case, must be preserved if the Administration wants to establish a reputation for fairness in disciplinary matters.