

A Pedagogical Case Study of the Keynote-Speaker Controversy at Oregon State University's Modern Sex Conference

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Abstract

This pedagogical case study is designed to stimulate discussion in undergraduate and graduate courses in higher education and student affairs administration, women's studies, intellectual freedom, and related subjects. The case involves the invitation of sex educator and pornography producer Tristan Taormino to speak at a student-organized sexuality conference at publicly funded Oregon State University (OSU) in 2011, and the subsequent cancellation of Taormino's speaking contract by OSU's student affairs administration due to concerns about the use of public money to finance the speech of a pornographer. The administration's actions sparked debate in the local, academic, and sexual health communities and garnered national news coverage. Based on news media reports and original interviews with many of the people involved, this case study details the administration's decision to cancel the contract, the OSU student response, and the response of the nearby University of Oregon.

This case study is designed to stimulate discussion about issues that arise in higher education administration. It is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation (statement adapted from Swiercz, 2002).

Introduction

This pedagogical case study presents the invitation of sex educator and pornography producer, Tristan Taormino, to speak at a student-organized sexuality conference at publicly funded Oregon State University (OSU) in 2011, and the subsequent cancellation of Taormino's speaking contract by OSU's student affairs administration due to concerns about the use of public money to finance the speech of a pornographer. The case study includes the response of the student organizers of the conference, the OSU student government and student union, and the response of the nearby University of Oregon. As a pedagogical case study, this case is intended to be an accurate report of events, leaving conceptual analysis in the hands of the reader. It is based on media reports and original interviews with many of the people involved.

Background Information on Tristan Taormino and Oregon State University

Tristan Taormino¹

Tristan Taormino is an author, editor, sex educator, and adult film director. She has published seven sex education books and edited eighteen editions of the Best Lesbian Erotica book series. She owns a pornography production company and directs sex education and "rough sex" adult films ("About Tristan," 2011). Taormino received the 2011 AVN Award for Best Educational Release and both the 2010 Trailblazer of the Year and the Lifetime Achievement awards from the Feminist Porn Awards (Estrella, 2011a). Taormino has lectured about gay and lesbian issues, sexuality, and feminism on college campuses since 1994. She has presented at over 40 public and private colleges and universities including Yale, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, University of California-Santa Barbara, and Georgetown University ("Colleges & universities," 2011).

¹ The author contacted Tristan Taormino's manager several times for comment on this case study and, as of December 2011, received no response.

Taormino has encountered controversy over her college appearances twice before. In 2004, Taormino was paid from student funds to speak at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro about safer sex practices. Following her appearance, a professor from a neighboring university wrote a newspaper column on Taormino's appearance, focusing on her work in the pornography industry. The chancellor of UNC-Greensboro received hundreds of complaint letters from readers of the column, and the chancellor stated that Taormino would not be invited back to the school. In response, students at UNC-Greensboro held an off-campus fundraiser to pay Taormino directly for another appearance. The funds being raised, she returned to campus a month after her first visit (Bowne, 2004; Taormino, 2004; Ayers, 2004).

In 2010, prior to Taormino's visit to Princeton University, a conservative student group protested the use of student funds for the event. At issue was not Taormino's lecture itself but rather a short screening of clips from her films after her speech. Despite initial protest, Taormino's lecture and screening proceeded as scheduled (Martins, 2010; Kwon, 2010).

Oregon State University

Oregon State University is a public land-grant research university founded in 1868. Situated on a 400-acre campus in Corvallis, Oregon, the University has almost 24,000 students in nearly 300 degree programs ("About," 2011). Relevant University organizations, departments, and programs are described below.

- *Intercultural Student Services within the Division of Student Affairs*

The Division of Student Affairs is comprised of 14 offices including Enrollment Management, Student Health Services, and Intercultural Student Services (ISS). Intercultural Student Services, renamed from Minority Education Office in 2007, includes offices that serve the needs of students who identify with the American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino/a, Black, and LGBT communities ("Departments and offices," 2011). The Office of LGBT Outreach and Services within ISS supports the University "to meet the specific academic, social, and cultural needs of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Allied (LGBTQQIA) students..." with retention of those students being the Office's main goal ("Mission statement," 2011, para. 1).

- *The Modern Sex conference*

The Modern Sex: Privilege, Communication, and Culture conference was presented by the ISS through the Office of LGBT Outreach and Services. It was organized and led by students with faculty and staff support ("Modern Sex: Privilege, Communication, and Culture," 2011). The conference planning committee was composed of student workers from LGBT Outreach and Services, the Pride Center, the Women's Center, and Student Health Services Health Promotion (all offices within the Division of Student Affairs), and Steven Leider, director of the Office of LGBT Outreach and Services, served as the liaison between the students on the conference committee and ISS (R. Ulrich, personal communication, November 14, 2011; Harr, 2011a; "Departments and offices," 2011). The goal of the conference was to "...challenge participants to examine the individual and collective struggles inherent to the entanglements of sexuality with the social and cultural systems of sex, gender, race, and class" ("Modern Sex: Privilege, Communication, and Culture," 2011, para. 2).

- *Memorial Union and the Memorial Union Program Council*

The Memorial Union Program Council (MUPC) is a student council that serves as the programming body for the Memorial Union, OSU's student union. The MUPC is the largest programming body at OSU and organizes events that "enhance student life and contribute to overall student development" ("Memorial Union Program Council," 2011, para. 1). The

Memorial Union is under the supervision of the Division of Student Affairs, but its budget is allotted from student fees (“Organizational chart: Division of Student Affairs reporting structure,” 2011; “Fee levels for 2010-2011,” 2011).

- *Associated Students of Oregon State University*

The Associated Students of Oregon State University (ASOSU) is the school’s student government organization. Under a shared governance agreement with OSU, the ASOSU represents the student body in the President’s Cabinet, the Faculty Senate, and other institutional structures (“Oregon State University’s shared governance with the Associated Students of Oregon State University,” n.d.). The ASOSU is funded entirely from student fees (“Fee levels for 2010-2011,” 2011).

The Controversy

On October 28, 2010, Tristan Taormino was booked – for a speaking fee of \$3,000 plus expenses – to be the keynote speaker of the Modern Sex: Privilege, Communication, and Culture conference taking place at Oregon State University on February 15 -16, 2011 (“Too sexy for OSU?,” 2011; Estrella, 2011b). Contract negotiations began in November, and Taormino stated that her manager, Colten Tognazzini, was advised to book airline tickets for the appearance in December while the final speaking contract was being drawn up (Taormino, 2011).

According to a student on the conference organizing committee, Taormino was selected to be the keynote speaker because the committee considered her an authority on LGBT sexual empowerment. Additionally, they hoped her involvement in the conference would help attract quality presentation proposals, and Taormino’s name appeared on all the conference’s promotional materials (Harris, 2011). The Modern Sex conference was inspired by the Memorial Union’s “Campaign for Understanding,” which promoted LGBT equality at OSU; the “It Gets Better” series of online videos showcasing positive adult LGBT lives; and several high-profile gay student suicides that had recently taken place around the country (R. Ulrich, personal communication, October 31, 2011). Taormino was asked to focus her keynote speech on LGBT empowerment (Estrella, 2011b). Written especially for the conference at the planning committee’s request, Taormino’s lecture, “Claiming Your Sexual Power,” addressed how to deal with homophobia and still be an empowered sexual being by shedding sexual shame and developing sexual communication skills (Harris, 2011).

On January 18, 2011, a month before the conference, Steven Leider, Director of the Office of LGBT Outreach and Services at OSU and the ISS staff liaison for the conference, contacted Tognazzini. (Taormino, 2011). Leider stated that the conference no longer had funding available for Taormino’s visit. When Tognazzini responded that, as the scheduling commitment was already made and the airplane tickets already purchased, he was willing to work with whatever lower amount OSU had, Leider stated, “We have to cancel Ms. Taormino’s appearance due to a lack of funding. It has been decided that OSU cannot pay Ms. Taormino with general fee dollars, because of the content of her resume and website” (Taormino, 2011, para. 88; S. Leider, personal communication, July 7, 2011).

Taormino’s response to OSU’s decision to cancel the funding for her keynote speech was disappointment and frustration. “If these general dollar funds are so delicate, so fragile, why give them to a conference on sex? ...I think OSU has the right to spend its money however it sees fit, but I feel like it then needs to be clear if there are strings attached when it says to a student group or conference, ‘We’ll give you this money’” (Estrella, 2011b, para. 3, 5).

According to Taormino, her manager spoke to an unnamed source at OSU who speculated that Taormino’s cancellation was prophylactic: administrators did not want to defend funding Taormino to state legislators who may “use OSU’s funding of a ‘pornographer’ on campus as ammunition to further cut budgets” (Taormino, 2011, para. 91).

Taormino, a self-identified feminist pornographer, responded to the University's judgment of her "resume and website" by saying, "I won't back away from claiming that I'm a pornographer.... and the idea that my work in the sex industry negates any other work I've done, or cancels out my other credentials, I think it's a double standard. It's about sexual shame – shaming people for choosing to do jobs that involve sexuality, and how that's incredibly devalued in our society.... This double standard still exists, where if you've been involved in the sex industry you're not worth listening to, you're not worth paying for your time, and your intellectual capacity is automatically disqualified" (Estrella, 2011b, para. 9).

In responding to media inquiries about Taormino's cancelled booking, OSU spokesperson Todd Simmons, Interim Vice President for University Relations and Marketing, explained that the conference was entirely paid for out of the school's Education and General Fund, which includes taxpayer money appropriated to the University by the Oregon Legislature. Simmons emphasized that the source of funds was the central issue and that the University would not have a problem with Taormino being paid with student fee funds or speaking for free. Simmons stated that "...particularly now as budgets tighten, it's incumbent on all of us to be careful about how we're spending taxpayer monies, and to not call into question the institution or the actions of those who are funding us with allowing that money to be spent on things that people might rightfully criticize for being inappropriate uses of that money" (Estrella, 2011c, para. 4).

Larry Roper, the Vice Provost for Student Affairs, was adamant that "The decision that [Taormino's speech] could not be paid for out of state funds should not have been interpreted as a decision to cancel the speaker... It was merely just sort of the presentation of the need to find other sources of funds which are available... It was, I think, quite frankly the stress of the moment that caused a reaction to cancel when in fact that was not the decision" (Harr, 2011a, para. 5). Roper also stated that Taormino would be reimbursed for the airplane tickets she had already purchased (Taormino, 2011).

University administrators received hundreds of emails in support of Taormino's scheduled appearance ("OSU update," 2011), and Larry Roper replied to emails sent to him with a form email that stated, in part:

As an institution of higher education, Oregon State University is committed to free speech and an open discussion of ideas on our campuses. However, as a public university, OSU and its representatives must be careful and judicious stewards of how we allow taxpayer monies allocated to the university to be spent in service of such discussions.

Organizers of the upcoming Modern Sex Conference at OSU recently sought approval to bring in a speaker for that event by presenting a partial description of the speaker in question as a writer and sex advice columnist. However, as arrangements were being made to complete the contract for the speaker, it became clear to those providing taxpayer funding for the conference that the speaker, in fact, is also a self-described pornographer with a significant online business in video pornography and related material. A decision was made by Student Affairs leadership that using public funds to cover a speaking fee and travel expenses for the speaker constituted an inappropriate use of those funds, and the speaker's appearance was thus cancelled (Taormino, 2011, para. 67-68).

In response to the assertion that she has a significant business selling pornography, Taormino said she is not "running a pornography empire" and receives about four weekly orders for products she carries on her Web site (Mirk, 2011a, para. 13). She estimated that those sales make up 10-15 percent of her income, pointing out that all of the products she sells are also available from Amazon.com (Mirk, 2011a). Taormino expressed her belief that most taxpayers understand that their contributions to higher education may fund both initiatives they do and do not

personally agree with, saying, “that’s what committing to the university community and experience means” (Estrella, 2011b, para. 12).

News of the cancellation of the keynote speech, spread by Taormino’s press release on the incident, created a stir in the sex education blogosphere and was covered in numerous local print and television news stories (“Doing what we won’t,” 2011). The local newspaper, *Gazette-Times*, and the OSU student newspaper, the *Daily Barometer*, published editorials in support of Taormino (“OSU dustup over sex speech raises sensitive issues,” 2011; “Too sexy for OSU?,” 2011). The *Gazette-Times* editorial offered this caution: “A university that starts to shy away from controversy for fear the topic might prove offensive to someone – legislators, taxpayers, or otherwise – puts at risk some portion of its soul” (“OSU dustup over sex speech raises sensitive issues,” 2011, para. 8).

Rachel Ulrich, one of the student organizers of the conference, spoke to several media outlets and commented on many blog posts addressing the controversy. She stated that the planning committee did not misrepresent Taormino’s work and included her full biography from her Web site in their funding paperwork (Estrella, 2011b). Taormino’s Web site biography states that she “runs her own adult film production company, Smart Ass Productions, and is currently an exclusive director for Vivid Entertainment” (“About Tristan,” 2011, para. 1). In a comment posted to the Practical Polyamory blog, Ulrich responded to assertions that student organizers neglected to mention Taormino’s pornography career: “Oh, the higher ups had a full picture [of Taormino’s background] from the beginning of this mess. They just changed their mind after an office assistant found out that Tristan was involved in porn and threw a temper tantrum.... Not only have they made themselves look unprofessional, but they are throwing the student [organizing] committee (myself included) under the bus” (Ulrich, 2011, para. 1, 3).

The ISS staff liaison to the conference, Steven Leider, was aware of both Taormino’s pornographic and literary achievements. However, he did not recall if her work in the adult film industry was ever discussed in meetings with his fellow ISS colleagues. Leider stated, “It didn’t register with me when I saw her resume and web site that those elements would be of concern to others at OSU. I was, at the time, under what I now know to be the mistaken belief that OSU was a sex-friendly environment” (S. Leider, personal communication, July 7, 2011).

Ulrich reported that she combed through the University’s Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual and the ISS Web site and did not find any guidance about the use of Education and General funds for speakers (Estrella, 2011b). Ulrich was frustrated that Student Affairs administrators had not voiced their objections earlier when an alternative speaker could have been chosen or the organizers could have explained their reasoning for inviting Taormino. She was angry that the decision by administrators to cancel Taormino’s funding was made without student organizer input and that the students were only notified about it after the fact. As there is no written policy about which speakers can and cannot be paid with Education and General funds, Ulrich felt the students were beholden to arbitrary administrative whim (Mirk, 2011b). Ulrich described her frustration in dealing with the OSU administration: “It’s hard to even express the level of communication breakdown over this issue.... When we finally met with ISS I must have asked 5 or 6 times point blank, ‘What is inappropriate about using taxpayer dollars to bring in an expert in this field to talk about this topic?’ I didn’t get a response. They averted their eyes and there was just a gulf of silence” (Estrella, 2011b, para. 15).

University spokesperson Simmons stated that controversial speakers are typically brought to campus by student organizations and paid for with student fee funds. Simmons described speakers who are typically paid for with Education and General Fund monies: “...they tend to be academic speakers, tend to be scientists or others from academia. They particularly tend not to be pornographers or people who have significant business interest in creating and selling and distributing pornography. That was the ultimate deciding factor in this matter. It certainly wasn’t her work as an author or as a sex advice columnist, it was the fact that on her website there are really graphic sexual depictions, there are banner ads for online pay-per-view pornography, and

so I think the Student Affairs leadership here made a sound decision that they could not approve using taxpayer funds for a speaker coming from that perspective” (Estrella, 2011c, para. 6, emphasis in original).

Many of the media stories about the cancelled keynote mentioned the pornography industry connections of Charlie Glickman, the man selected as the replacement keynote speaker, and the presence of another pornographer on the conference schedule, Tobi Hill-Meyer (Hill-Meyer, 2011; Turner, 2011a; Fox, 2011). Glickman, who holds a Ph.D. in Adult Sexuality Education and is certified by the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists as a sexuality educator, is the Education Program Manager at Good Vibrations, a sex toy and pornography retailer (Glickman, 2009). In addition to selling all of Taormino’s books and films, Good Vibrations also produces and distributes its own pornographic videos (“Good Releasing,” 2011).

Glickman had initially been scheduled to give the closing keynote and was later asked to fill Taormino's spot as the opening keynote instead. Glickman agreed to the move but emphasized his collegial relationship with Taormino and that he hoped OSU would reverse their decision and invite her back to the conference (Estrella, 2011c). Glickman’s honorarium and travel expenses were paid for from Education and General funds (Turner, 2011b).

Glickman wrote about the situation on his blog and gave several media interviews, asking, “What is it about creating sexually explicit movies that automatically disqualifies a person as a speaker?” (Estrella, 2011c, para. 13). And “...why is it okay to talk about [pornography] but not okay to be somebody who makes it, given that it is a legal product[?]” (Estrella, 2011c, para. 14). He viewed the cancellation of Taormino’s speech as indicative of a greater issue in academia: making “room to talk about people as long as you don’t have to talk with them” (Glickman, 2011a, para. 10).

Glickman, an expert on sexuality and shame, responded to administration statements that cancelling Taormino’s speech was solely a funding source issue, saying, “...even if we take it at face value and accept that this is only about having a ‘controversial’ speaker be paid out of the wrong fund, it’s still about sexual shame.... It’s about shame because the school is worried that they’ll be punished for starting a discussion about sex. Silencing a conversation that makes you uncomfortable or that you think is ‘inappropriate’ is usually about shame” (Glickman, 2011b, para. 3-4).

Aside from Taormino, Tobi Hill-Meyer, winner of the 2010 Feminist Porn Award in the Emerging Filmmaker category, was the other pornographer on the Modern Sex conference schedule. She led a workshop titled “Porn as a Feminist Tool” that included clips of “feminist, queer, and counter-culture porn” (“Modern Sex conference schedule,” 2011, para. 34). Hill-Meyer, who resides in nearby Eugene, Oregon, was not compensated for her presentation and did not request any reimbursement from OSU for her minimal travel expenses (T. Hill-Meyer, personal communication, May 5, 2011).

University spokesman Simmons explained the University’s distinction between Taormino and Glickman and Hill-Meyer. “There is a difference between the work that Glickman does and the work [Taormino] does. I would say his is much more recognizable as a sex educator. Hers is commercially driven. She is more recognizable through her work as a pornographer than through her work as a sex educator” (Fox, 2011, para. 24). In regard to the presence of fellow feminist pornographer Hill-Meyer, Simmons reiterated that the central issue was the use of Education and General funds and, as Hill-Meyer was presenting her workshop for free, no funding issue existed (Mirk, 2011a).

The Lecture at the University of Oregon

In response to OSU’s decision to cancel Taormino’s keynote speech, another university in the area, the University of Oregon (UO), invited Taormino to speak on their campus. Taormino was already planning to be in Portland, Oregon, to give two workshops at a feminist sex-toy boutique

on February 13 and 14, 2011 (Taormino, 2011). Asked to speak directly about the controversy at OSU and how and why she began to make pornography, Taormino presented a lecture on “My Life as a Feminist Pornographer,” on February 16. Taormino’s appearance was sponsored primarily by the University’s Center for the Study of Women in Society, with additional sponsorship provided by other departments and organizations within the University of Oregon. These included the Clark Honors College; the Associated Students of the University of Oregon’s Women’s Center and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Alliance; the Oregon Humanities Center; the Division of Student Affairs’ Sexual Wellness Advocacy Team; and the Departments of Women’s and Gender Studies, Sociology, Comparative Literature, and Cinema Studies (Fox, 2011).

Jennifer Burns Levin, the faculty member who extended the invitation to Taormino, studies sexuality and pornography. In explaining her rationale for organizing Taormino’s lecture at UO, Levin said she disagreed with the premise it was inappropriate to fund a speech by a pornographer: “I am a taxpayer, and I would love to hear a feminist pornographer speak” (Fox, 2011, para. 11). “Tristan’s involvement with pornography made OSU administrators uncomfortable, but I think they missed the point. Tristan’s sex-positive, woman- and queer-friendly work in an industry known for its exploitation of women addresses exactly the kind of labor issues we should be discussing on college campuses” (“OSU update,” 2011, para. 11).

Carol Stabile, director of the Center for the Study of Women in Society, which is funded entirely by a bequest, stated that the Taormino event followed the protocol typical of events that a faculty member asks the Center to fund – the Center provides the majority of the funding and then helps the faculty member approach other departments on campus regarding co-sponsorship (Harris, 2011). Levin confirmed that “the funding comes from mixed sources: academic departments, centers and student organizations” (“Doing what we won’t,” 2011, para. 4). Stabile emphasized that “the amount of taxpayer money that makes up university budgets in Oregon is very, very low,” making up between 7 to 8 percent of the University of Oregon’s total annual budget (Harris, 2011, min. 26-27).

The Resolution at Oregon State University

In response to OSU’s cancellation of Taormino’s keynote speech, Andrew Struthers, the Associated Students of Oregon State University (ASOSU) president, and Sarah Hulse, the ASOSU’s Women’s Affairs Task Force director, distributed a petition to gauge student support for using student activity fee funds to pay for Taormino’s appearance (Mirk, 2011c). While the majority of respondents supported funding Taormino’s speech with student fees, some students objected to the use of either General fund or student fee dollars to bring Taormino to campus (Leineweber, 2011; Harris, 2011). As a result of the student desire to bring Taormino to campus, the ASOSU joined with the Memorial Union Program Council (MUPC) to collectively sponsor her appearance from their program budgets, both of which are funded with student fees (Harr, 2011b; Cole, 2011). The contract for Taormino’s appearance was finalized on February 4, 2011 (Cole, 2011).

Although Taormino gave her original speech, “Claiming Your Sexual Power,” in the same venue and on the original day and time she had previously been scheduled, her appearance was not considered part of the Modern Sex conference (Blue, 2011; Cole, 2011). The official sponsor of Taormino’s lecture was the MUPC, but promotional materials stated that the event was presented by the “Collective Sexual Beings of Oregon State University” to show that Taormino’s visit was the result of a collaborative effort between students from the Women’s Center, Pride Center, ASOSU, MUPC, and Modern Sex conference organizing committee (R. Ulrich, personal communication, October 31, 2011). The Memorial Union president, Craig Bidiman, explained the organizations’ decision to fund the speech, saying, “Ultimately, it came down to the fact that no one else was funding her, and we saw a situation that could potentially wreak havoc on our community if it wasn’t cleared up, namely because our friends in the Women’s Center and LGBT

community were really frustrated and worried that this situation could put them in a negative light because they had members on the planning committee... We didn't want to see any of our student groups targeted or misrepresented or left out or blamed for anything in response to her being uninvited. We want to represent our student groups and community" (Harr, 2011b, para. 9).

The OSU administration supported the use of student fees to fund Taormino's speech since the University never had an issue with the content of her talk (Estrella, 2011c). Said OSU spokesperson Todd Simmons: "We support the right of student organizations and our student representatives to spend student-fee money as they feel is appropriate. We stand by our decision though, as those who are responsible for overseeing expenditure of taxpayer dollars, and continue to feel that it was an inappropriate use of taxpayer dollars to bring her to campus..." (Harr, 2011b, para. 13).

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