

Recently officials at Villanova University have established an academic policy that the campus book store not carry *Cliff Notes*, the slim yellow and black paper book pamphlet summaries of major literary works. "We're trying to send a message that a university education is not to be trifled with," said John R. Johannson, Vice President for Academic Affairs at Villanova. "We want to encourage students to plunge into a piece of literature. It is more important that they ask questions than get the right answers," said Dr. Johannson. The publisher of *Cliff Notes* has responded by calling the Villanova policy "censorship." In a letter that was printed as an advertisement that appeared in the Villanova student newspaper the publisher said, "[i]t is disappointing when students are subjected to book banning and censorship in a university setting."

Is the Villanova policy morally justifiable? If so, why, If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: One may question the wisdom of the Villanova policy, insofar as it relies upon a negative, prohibitory method to achieve goals that might be pursued better through positive measures to increase the interest of students in studying literature. The policy, however, is not censorship. It would be if it conflicted with the basic purposes of a college or university, which Villanova clearly considers itself to be, or if it infringed upon important freedoms of students. The policy, however, is unobjectionable in either of these two respects. Censorship involves depriving people of access to particular communicational materials because the censor believes that exposure to them might result in people coming to form beliefs, opinions, or attitudes of which the censor disapproves. In the case of the Villanova policy, however, as Mr. Johannson noted, its express purpose is to encourage students to think for themselves. If the campus bookstore was the only place where a Villanova student could purchase *Cliff Notes* then the policy would nonetheless amount to censorship regardless of its purpose. There are clearly, however, other places besides the campus bookstore where a Villanova student can buy *Cliff Notes*.

Case from the February 26, 1998 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1998.