

Two conceptions of university community

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Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary’s University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(902) 420-5825
mark.mercer@smu.ca

There are two conceptions of what university community should be, and the differences between them are mostly about respect.

On the first conception, members of a university community are to respect each other as individuals, as persons.

On the second conception, they are to respect each other’s values or beliefs or cultures or experiences—whatever it is that makes up a person’s identity.

On the first conception, professors and students are to be treated as autonomous agents brought together in community so that they might more effectively and more pleasantly pursue their inquiries into the ways of the world. Respecting each other consists in applying no pressures other than those of argument and evidence. Members of the community may believe or value whatever they wish, study whatever they wish however they wish, and say whatever they wish, with no fear of censure or ostracism.

This is the conception according to which a university community is a community of intellectuals.

On the second conception, professors and students are to be valued and celebrated for the groups to which they belong. Respecting each other consists in helping each to appreciate her identity and the identities of others, and the struggles and accomplishments associated with them. Members of the community have come together in order to discover how from within their own tradition they might best contribute to a diverse society.

This is the conception according to which a university community is one of appreciation and validation.

Now, a community of intellectuals is a community of criticism and controversy. No idea and no value is exempt from being roughed up, not even the ideas or values on which the community is founded.

Of course, this means that in this community feelings will get hurt, as people often quite naturally take personally attacks on the ideas and values that define who they are. Moreover, people being people, their attacks on ideas and values will sometimes, though not inevitably, in fact be personal. That argument and evidence are the only appropriate critical tools doesn’t mean that they are the only tools that will get used.

But because members of the community recognize the ideal, they will attempt to live up to it. And, with luck, they will also grow fairly thick skins.

A community of appreciation and validation cannot be one of criticism or controversy, at least not one in which the ideas or values of any member may be criticised. Rules will have to be in place about the targets and nature of criticism, and there will have to be policies to deal with violations. The administration will have to devise and enforce codes of conduct for students, professors, and visitors to the university. Whereas at a university of intellectuals, professors and students will form societies at will and invite to campus whomever they want, at a university of validation a committee will vet society applications and proposed campus events for both content and format.

The attractions of a university of validation are easy enough to see. It's not pleasant to think one's identity is under attack or being neglected, and it can be difficult to learn in an unpleasant atmosphere. But it's also easy to see, people being people, that such a university might often be a place of rancour and enmity, where anything said could be perceived by someone as a slight, or at least a piece of insensitivity.

There's no reason a university of validation couldn't produce good research and train students well, though there's some reason to think a university of intellectuals will do better. Universities with religious charters and missions, for instance, though they lack the diversity that characterises the secular kind, are universities of validation, in which certain topics, methods, and conclusions are out of bounds, and yet such universities have added to the growth of understanding and have prepared countless young adults for careers and life.

A preference for one conception of university community over another, then, cannot primarily have to do with the research and teaching missions of a university. It has to do mainly with the sorts of experience available at each, the sort of community one enjoys, the sort of person one wants to be.

Right now in Canada most, maybe all, universities embody both conceptions. All style themselves places of critical discussion, yet all state firmly that they are safe spaces, "safe" in the sense of non-threatening to one's identity.

Administrators have tried, with some success, to find workable compromises between the two conceptions. At my university, for instance, a memo from the academic vice-president distinguished between the inside and the outside of the classroom. What is unacceptable outside the classroom can be acceptable within it.

In the end, of course, compromise is impossible, as any concession to the university of validation must restrict our conduct as intellectuals. Now I know which conception of university community I prefer (and which conception I roundly despise). But though I can't see how the two conceptions could be reconciled, I don't see any reason why Canada cannot be home to both. Community at some universities could be intellectual, at other universities validating.

Partisans of validation would disagree. Not only can critical discussion put people at risk of psychological harm, they say, but it also can easily lead to the destruction of laws and institutions we hold dear. Critical discussion of abortion, for instance, not only disturbs and hurts, but threatens a woman's right to choose.

But why not try it anyway? Here's my fanciful suggestion: let's have professors and students voice their preference, and then shift people around accordingly. One venerable reason for having lots of universities rather than a few large ones, after all, is to

provide people with options. No starker or more consequential choice exists than that between a university of intellectuals and a university of validation.