

## **In praise of dangerous universities**

*University Affairs*, 3 May 2010

On-line at <http://www.universityaffairs.ca/in-praise-of-dangerous-universities.aspx>

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A safe university isn't a university free of theft, vandalism, and violence. It's not one where the ice is cleared quickly from the sidewalks. Rather, a safe university is a university at which no one will hear racist, sexist, or homophobic comments, or any discriminatory slights against a person's religion, nationality, age, or disability.

Canadians came to understand only just recently what it is for a university to be safe, as a result of Ann Coulter's attempt to speak at the University of Ottawa. Ms Coulter, an American political commentator, cancelled her engagement on the advice of her security chief, who judged that those demanding safety (in the new sense) were threatening people's safety (in the old sense).

It's no little thing, that people off campus now know this new meaning of "safe." If any good came of Ms Coulter's trip to Ottawa, enlightenment on that point is certainly it.

That's because intelligent and spirited high-school students throughout the nation now realize they have one overriding concern: to make sure that the university they choose is dangerous.

A dangerous university is not one given to making people feel good about themselves, at least not on principle. It is not about affirming identities or celebrating cultures or contributions.

Rather, a dangerous university is about investigation and criticism, about constructing from evidence and argument alone a view of the world, and about knowing how to put that view to the test. It is a university at which one will encounter disturbing ideas and values, sometimes spoken by the very people who advocate them. It is a university at which people speak freely and at which no view is out of bounds.

So how can potential applicants know which universities are dangerous? Are there any clues a teenager might notice that will tell her that the university she's considering is safe and, so, best avoided?

In fact, there are many. What follows are just some of the more obvious.

1) The students' association bans anti-abortion groups. This isn't a dead giveaway that the campus is inhospitable to free speech, for what really matters is the administration's response to such bans. If the administration itself then sponsors the banned group or, better, dissolves the students' association, then the administration, at least, is concerned that the campus be dangerous.

2) The university has committees or officials to vet proposed campus events for either content or format. Or, the university sends guidelines on acceptable conduct to participants. At a dangerous university, on the other hand, campus groups invite whom they want and run their events in whatever formats they want. The university doesn't even vet posters or other communications.

3) Formal procedures exist to deal with non-academic complaints against professors, complaints, that is, that have nothing to do with unfair grading or incompetent teaching. A university that persecutes professors for saying or doing something offensive or hurtful is not a place that welcomes the rough and tumble of debate. At a dangerous university, a professor's remarks might be savagely critiqued in student newspapers or other venues, but they won't draw any official attention.

4) Official anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies declare that words and ideas themselves can be harmfully discriminatory or that harassment has to do with the feelings of the complainant.

5) University memos or other communications endorse or, even, mention any of Canada's various laws against speaking hatefully. A dangerous university, for its part, will be a leader in the fight to remove anti-speech provisions from both human rights legislation and the criminal code.

That's a good start for a checklist. I commend it to all smart and spirited kids seeking to begin university in the fall.

I fear, though, that we, the professoriate in Canada, have already condemned the entire next generation to safety.