

George Jonas on Canada's university administrators

The Cranky Professor

The Journal, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, 8 – 14 December 2010

Mark Mercer

Department of Philosophy

Saint Mary's University

Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

(902) 420-5825

mark.mercer@smu.ca

“The next great act of Canadian philanthropy must be to buy out all university administrators’ contracts, and replace [the administrators] with the first persons encountered at the nearest bus stop. Whatever it accomplished scholastically, it would lead to a marked moral improvement of higher education in Canada.”

That’s George Jonas, from a recent column in *The National Post*.

It’s a harsh judgement. Jonas is saying that the average Canadian on the street cares more about freedom of expression, freedom of discussion, and intellectual community than do the people who have risen to the top to run our universities. If Jonas is right, two people picked at random likely would do a better job protecting and nurturing intellectual community on the Saint Mary’s campus than our current president and academic vice president do.

In defence of university administrators in Canada, one might note that when an administrator is doing her job well, we don’t hear that she is. When security at a contentious event is good and would-be disrupters know they won’t be tolerated, no story emerges for reporters to cover. We hear only about the bad administrators, the ones who, through incompetence or connivance, cancel the event or otherwise give in to the enemies of the university.

According to this line of thought, even if conscientious administrators are in the majority, we wouldn’t know it, for the efforts of good administrators don’t attract attention.

True, perhaps, but we have to add that much that administrators can do to harm campus culture will also stay out of the newspapers. Administrators can discourage a lively campus in all sorts of ways, with the result that nothing happens, neither within nor outside the classroom, that might rile the would-be disrupters or upset the sensitive. From the outside, a university might look like it’s humming along nicely, even though those inside it are slowly dying of asphyxiation.

Thus, to the claim that for all we know, the vast majority of university administrators are doing their jobs well, a defender of Jonas can respond that for all we know, things are even worse than we’ve heard.

One might alternatively note against Jonas that protecting and nurturing intellectual community is not the university’s administrators’ only job. There’s also running the place. There’s also finding the money in order to keep running the place. Whatever’s true, that an average Canadian could keep a modern university afloat isn’t.

But that wasn’t Jonas’s contention. Jonas was speaking of the superior values and moral fibre of the average Canadian, not their superior administrative or fund-raising abilities.

The record of either administrative treason against the values of the university or administrative cowardice in face of challenges to them is not short. Just in the past few years we have had officials at the University of Calgary pursuing disciplinary action against students who criticized a professor on Facebook, the letter sent to Ann Coulter by the provost at the University of Ottawa, the policy at Carleton University that restricts protesters' access to the quad, the decision at York University to require a campus group to foot an exorbitant bill for security for an academic event, the banning of political cartoons at both Carleton and Ottawa U, the attempt at Queen's University to have mediators monitor campus conversations for racism and sexism, the attempt by Kwantlen Polytechnic University to stifle research on assisted suicide, the refusal by various universities to stop student councils from discriminating against pro-life and other campus groups..., well, the list goes on.

Of course, we have to add our own administration's intervention against a professor when a few students objected to the cartoons he had on his door, its sanctioning of a formal process into whether his posting of those cartoons harassed anyone (I'm not making this up), its mishandling of a disruptive protest at a campus event (and its mishandling of its mishandling), its unwillingness to hire security for a proposed public debate on multiculturalism...(let's stop here).

Whether through sympathy with this or that social or political programme or mere spinelessness, a great many university administrators have been acting against the ethos of the university as a place of intellectual community.

The practical problem is what to do about it. How can we work to create and preserve universities marked by freedom of expression and freedom of discussion, where controversial themes are welcome, where campus events never fall prey to the heckler's—or the thug's—veto?

By holding administrators accountable for their actions, and by insisting that only people committed to a free campus be hired as administrators in the first place.

Policing administrators is a task for students and professors, primarily for professors. If we professors do not state clearly that we expect a free university and make public our disapproval when our expectations are thwarted, nothing will change. The universities we get stuck with will be the universities we deserve.