

## **Anti-Intellectualism on campus: When students' associations go bad**

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Part of a university's mission is to secure and nurture intellectual community. What should happen, then, when the students' association or council at a university acts against this mission?

Last week, the Carleton University Student Association (CUSA) revoked a pro-life group's club status and barred it from meeting on campus. According to CUSA, because the group denies a woman's right to choose, it runs afoul of the association's anti-discrimination policy.

CUSA is not the first students' association in Canada to deny or revoke club or society status to groups of students. In the past five or six years, associations at various universities have done similar things.

Most often, the target of these bans is a pro-life group, but not always. A few years ago, a group of students at Dalhousie University opposed to religion had trouble getting club status. Being against religion violated the association's policy that societies were not to be against things. The group could be for atheism, but it couldn't be against religion.

Banning a pro-life or anti-religion group is an attack on intellectual culture because it denies people the ability to say what they want and to participate as they will in discussion and debate.

Freedom of expression and freedom of discussion are at the core of intellectual community. Intellectuals are concerned that no one's values or beliefs be subjected to any pressures save those of evidence and argument. It is because of this commitment that intellectuals assemble in universities. They want institutional protection so that they can live in light of their commitments to understand things as they are and to value as they find appropriate.

The objection students' associations have to allowing any opinion at all to be expressed and endorsed on campus is that some opinions are upsetting to members of the university community. Hearing these opinions and the feelings behind them robs these people of the peace of mind, the feeling of belonging, and the confidence in their identities that they need in order to participate fully in academic and campus life. In order to welcome these people into university community, the upsetting opinions or their advocacy must be suppressed. That the students' association is able and willing to deny certain resources reassures these people that they will be able to participate in academic and campus life in safety.

This, of course, is the new ideology of the safe campus. It is an ideology currently having much success in undermining the ideal of the university as a community of intellectuals. It is at odds with the intellectual's desire to expose her beliefs and values to criticism and, thereby, to construct her identity for herself.

So what should happen, then, when a students' association tries to impose the ideology of the safe campus and puts the university at risk?

The administration of the university should step in, of course. It is the task of the administration to protect the university from attack, both from without and within. Immediately, administrators such as the vice-president academic, or professors deputized for the task by the vp academic, should sit down with the association and explain how deeply inconsistent the association's position is with the mission of the university.

Second, if the first course fails, the administration should itself supply the group of students with whatever resources the students' association has denied it. The administration of the university should explain to the university community generally, in written statements or, better, at a town-hall meeting, why it is doing what it is doing and how the students' association is in conflict with the university's deepest values.

Third, the students themselves should petition the students' association. Students should make sure that none of the student politicians who supported denying the group club or society status are re-elected.

Now what if this goes on for another year? What if the next council again seeks to ban a club?

Eventually it becomes time for the administration to dissolve the students' association and turn its functions over to student services.

This isn't anti-democratic because students' associations, though elected, are not governments. Anyway, a university is not a democracy, even though some of its bodies are comprised of elected members. When its mission is attacked, it can alter its institutional arrangements to respond to that attack.

At universities all over Canada administrations have been shirking their duty to secure and nurture intellectual community. That's not entirely surprising—though university values are the values administrators are supposed to serve, they might not be the administrators' own values. The buck stops at the professors, for they are the professional intellectuals at the heart of the community. They model the way of life the students aspire to live. What is surprising is that professors have not been demanding that administrators do their job.