

The University of Regina bucks the trend and stands up for freedom of expression

Halifax *Chronicle Herald*, Wednesday 22 June 2011
On-line at <http://thechronicleherald.ca/Letters/1249678.html>

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

Canadian universities have been doing a lousy job protecting and nurturing freedom of expression. Time and again, university administrators either themselves interfere with the free expression of controversial opinions or stand aside when students or others do. Even worse, professors seldom utter a word of criticism when this happens.

That's why it's so surprising and gratifying to see that the University of Regina acted strongly and quickly to defend freedom of expression and the integrity of its mission in face of demands for censorship.

The Faculty of Arts at the University of Regina had entered into an agreement with the Regina Downtown Business Improvement District (RDBID) to present in a downtown park a series of talks by U of R professors. The second talk was to be given Tuesday 14 June by Emily Eaton, an assistant professor of geography. But a week earlier, when the RDBID learned of the title of Dr Eaton's talk, it demanded that she speak on a different subject. Otherwise it would cancel the event.

Most other universities, I fear, if past performance is an accurate guide, would have acceded to the RDBID's demand. Especially when money's tight, it's not a good idea to stand against the business community in your town. And administrators could have easily agreed publicly with the RDBID that the subject was "potentially volatile and perhaps harmful to some members of the public," as a RDBID spokesperson explained. They could have employed the standard trope that permitting the talk would create a hostile environment for some students or reflect badly on the university. They could have noted that Dr Eaton is free to find another venue for her talk.

To their credit, administrators at the University of Regina neither suggested to Dr Eaton that she give a different talk nor allowed the talk to be cancelled.

Instead, they immediately withdrew from their association with the RDBID and declared that the University of Regina would sponsor by itself not just Dr Eaton's talk but the complete series of talks.

Richard Kleer, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, said, quite rightly, that Dr Eaton's topic isn't the issue, but that "it's simply a question of we need to have her be allowed to speak."

To put this action into perspective, let us recall just a few recent incidents in which university administrators have faced calls to limit expression.

At the University of Guelph, when protestors chained themselves to the stage to prevent a lecture by Christie Blatchford, the administrator on the scene cancelled the talk, saying he didn't want to give the protesters the opportunity to be photographed being pulled off the stage. (The

University of Guelph rehabilitated itself by inviting Blatchford back, though it embarrassed itself again soon afterward by reprimanding an engineering student who had posed by her work in a bikini.) The president and provost of the University of Ottawa were happy to inform Ann Coulter that they support our country's repressive hate- and discriminatory-speech policies. Carleton University will push off to the side any demonstration that students or others complain about, or arrest the demonstrators. A couple years ago, Saint Mary's University allowed protesters to disrupt an anti-abortion presentation; just this year, it failed to react when the students' association ordered a campus group to remove a sign from a display it had set up.

It is not just that the University of Regina withdrew and took the series under its own wing. Also impressive is that so far, at least, neither Dr Kleer nor anyone else has got off topic or tried to be conciliatory.

The title of Dr Eaton's presentation is "Solidarity with Palestine: The Case for Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel." One way to get off topic is to begin your defence of Dr Eaton by saying "While I disagree with what she has to say..." Happily, no one has (yet) gone that route.

Another temptation is to suggest that the fears of the RDBID are exaggerated, that really the talk, though controversial, wouldn't be inflammatory.

This would be implicitly to concede that had the talk been likely to cause hurt and loathing, or to stimulate a boycott of certain products or shops, then it would be all right to cancel it. Again, the University of Regina has done well not to comment at all on the content or likely effect of what Dr Eaton intended to say. (Dr Eaton herself, though, hasn't followed their lead. She said, implausibly, if even coherently, that there's a "strong Palestinian solidarity movement, so I don't think it's controversial.")

Some defenders of the RDBID deny that the RDBID is upset by the controversial nature of the topic. Rather, they say, what's upsetting is the format in which Dr Eaton will address the topic. If the event were to be a debate, they add, and not a lecture, all would be fine.

The University of Regina is to be commended for not rising to this bait. The demand to control the format of events is a favourite tactic of enemies of freedom of expression. It must be resisted, not just because giving in to it would stimulate more demands. Universities can foster freedom of expression only by enabling organizers to choose their own formats.

As a final note, the RDBID, in contrast to the University of Regina, seems to lack the courage of its convictions. Spokespeople for and defenders of the RDBID say that the talk would make people uncomfortable. They don't admit that it might be bad for business, which surely is the real reason they sought to cancel it, nor do they voice support for the Israeli policies or actions of which Dr Eaton disapproves.

The University of Regina has in this instance given strong support both to freedom of expression and to the integrity of its mission to bring scholarship and opinion to the public. Good for the U of R! Will other universities follow its example?