

The Union or the Academic Senate

Letter to the editor
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I agree with Wayne Peters about the nature and extent of the current threats to university education in Canada (“Threats to PSE Demand Mobilization of Academics,” CAUT Bulletin, September 2011, p. A3). I don’t think strengthening unions, though, is the best way to meet them.

Peters argues that since academic senates in this country are moribund, unions should take up some of their tasks. To that end, he calls on unions to invigorate their members. But if union efforts to get academics talking and working can succeed, so, too, could senate efforts.

It would be better that we direct our energies into getting senates to do what they are supposed to do than into widening the mandate of unions. Unions are about collective action and support for goals set by the group, whether one accepts those goals or not. They have a collectivist ethos that’s good for certain political ends, but not for sustaining intellectual community among different-minded individuals.

For instance, unions, or at least people active in unions, seem to be siding with specific social causes against freedom of expression on campus when they perceive the two to conflict. I’m thinking about discussions of abortion, discussions of race or ethnicity, and discussions of the values and practices of different religious groups.

With the important exception of cases involving violations of the academic freedom of professors, unions and those active in them don’t seem to be taking a leading role in protecting campuses as places where people are free to speak their minds.