

## Academic freedom for its own sake

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Academic freedom, Peter MacKinnon tells us, is for something; it doesn't exist for its own sake ("What do we mean when we talk about academic freedom?", *University Affairs*, November 2011, pp. 35 – 36). What it is for is "to advance scholarly enquiry in the interests of seeking truth."

That is why, according to MacKinnon, their possessing academic freedom shouldn't protect professors from sanctions when what they write or say doesn't serve to advance scholarly enquiry. And faculty unions should recognize this, and get out of the way when administrators are trying to deal with irresponsible professors. Best that they stand aside so that administrators can protect academic values and secure the independence and self-governance of their institutions.

MacKinnon is wrong, though, to think academic freedom isn't to be valued for its own sake. It is, just as freedom of expression is. Academic freedom, and freedom of expression on campus generally, exists as a constitutive value of the enquirer's way of life. That we be free to say what we wish how we wish is something we should value and protect as an end in itself crucial to our identity as academics.

The best statement of the view that academic freedom isn't merely necessary or useful to scholarly enquiry but a constitutive value of the scholar's life and ideals is the essay "Why Academic Freedom?", by Ronald Dworkin.<sup>1</sup>

The key idea Dworkin expresses is that scholars, scientists, and intellectuals prize not simply knowledge but understanding and learning, and, thus, hold themselves responsible in their enquiries to no pressures save those of evidence and argument. They come together in universities to enjoy the community of other scholars, scientists, and intellectuals. Out of respect for their colleagues as fellow scholars, scientists, and intellectuals, they grant all members of their community wide freedom of expression, wide freedom, that is, from institutional, social, and political pressures to think or value one way rather than another.

It's not having true beliefs that is important to the scholar, but having true beliefs for the right reasons. But what are to count as the right reasons is itself a matter of enquiry, not something to be closed off by an authority. It is certainly not to be closed off by a dean or a vice-president academic; it's not even to be closed off by the discipline or the community of scholars.

The justification for public support of universities, universities, that is, that understand themselves as communities of scholars, will certainly include that such universities produce knowledge and artefacts useful to the societies that house them. But that is not the only

justification. Important also is that universities as communities of scholars are marked by a culture of independence and, thus, constitute a line of defence against cultures of conformity. Sometimes, though maybe rarely, the young people who study at universities gain a taste for independence against conformity and bring that taste to the wider world after they graduate.

Now a standard criticism of wide academic freedom and wide freedom of expression on campus is that scholarship and teaching need protection from the charlatans and mountebanks among us, and protection means policing. Unless administrators have some weapons to use against the holocaust deniers, 9/11 truthers, and climate-change sceptics, research will be corrupted and students will graduate both ignorant and cynical.

That this criticism of academic freedom is almost universal among university administrators (and enjoys healthy support among professors) might well speak to a serious problem within universities today. For the obvious response to it is that evidence and argument are all the protection research and teaching need. Perhaps, since MacKinnon and other administrators are asking to be able to use pressure to straighten out irresponsible professors, we who champion wide freedom of expression on campus haven't been fulfilling our responsibilities to engage critically with our peers. Is the problem that academics today are too nice, more concerned to respect their colleagues' views than to respect them as academics?

Of course, even if the problems for which MacKinnon and other administrators blame wide academic freedom are, in reality, minor or non-existent, we professors should still work tirelessly to reinvigorate the culture of criticism on our campuses. Not because, or not only because, doing so would improve research and teaching. But mainly because it is our pleasure as academics committed to the life of the mind to start an intellectual dust-up whenever we can.

1. Originally published under the title "Why We Need a New Interpretation of Academic Freedom" in Louis Menand, ed., *The Future of Academic Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996), pp. 187 – 198; reprinted as "Why Academic Freedom?" in Ronald Dworkin, *Freedom's Law* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1996), pp. 244 – 260.