

## Reasonable accommodation and academic freedom

The Cranky Professor

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Should professors make accommodations in their courses for disabled students or others with special needs? Of course they should. Should professors be required to make accommodations? No, they should not. A university that can direct professors' teaching is a university that does not respect academic freedom, and a university that does not respect academic freedom is not an institution of liberal learning.

The above questions are not merely theoretical. It happens here Saint Mary's, if only occasionally, that a professor fails to accommodate a student and that a dean corrects her. The second wrong does not put things right.

Professors differ in teaching styles and in the goals they set for themselves. Two professors teaching different sections of the same course might assign different texts and use different grading schemes. They might emphasize different elements in the subject matter or seek to cultivate in their students different skills or attitudes.

My department, for instance, runs three or four sections of introduction to philosophy a year. Some professors who teach it assign readings from the history of philosophy, others contemporary readings; some use primary sources, others texts written for beginning students. Some of us are keen to help students to develop the analytical and argumentative skills of our discipline, some of us are keen to get students excited about the play of ideas. Some of us mostly lecture, some of us mostly break the class into discussion groups. Some professors grade class participation, some don't.

Professors differ also in their techniques of classroom management and the goals they mean their techniques to serve. Unprepared students, disengaged or, even, disruptive students, absenteeism, lateness—we all have an approach to these problems. Some professors are concerned to involve and teach as many students enrolled in their course as possible; for my part, I'm concerned to protect the serious students from the harm causal and disengaged students can inflict on them.

One reason professors should be free to teach as they will and for whatever goals they will is that professors have different talents, different strengths, different weaknesses. What works well for one might not work at all for another. Another, more important reason, is that good teaching is itself a matter of enquiry, and enquiry requires the freedom to experiment. Neither of these is the central reason, though.

What is at the heart of academic freedom in teaching is simply what is at the heart of academic freedom generally: the commitment to live and work guided only by the pressure of evidence and argument. The very point of rules and sanctions, on the other hand, is close off and shut down discussion. Restrictions on freedom of teaching are inimical to our identity and mission. Rules and sanctions give us reasons to behave one way rather than another that are reasons neither of evidence nor of argument.

If one of our tasks as professors is to help our students to become independent critical thinkers, able to enjoy and contribute to a free society, we must fail in that task if we cannot model for our students the behaviour of independent critical thinkers, able to use our freedom well.

So suppose, then, that a professor denies a disabled student the use of some technology that would help the student to learn. What is to be done, if the professor is free to ban this technology from her classroom?

Criticism and discussion is what is to be done—public criticism and discussion. What are the professor's grounds for her denial? Are they good grounds? What are the professor's pedagogical goals? How can they be met without denying the student the use of his technology?

At the end of the day, though, even if the denial has been well shown to lack merit, the professor must not be forced to relent. If she doesn't change her mind (even if she does, but refuses to relent anyway), she needs to be able to do as she pleases.

But what of the student, who now will either withdraw from the course or learn less in it than she is capable of learning? The plight of disabled students is not to be brushed away. Professors who would be happy to accommodate disabled students often do not know how to do so, and some professors, tragically, aren't interested in accommodation in the first place. I've been told that some professors don't wish to teach the disabled at all, as they feel that the presence of the disabled demeans their discipline.

This is where university administrators have a powerful argument for policies and sanctions that would require all of us to make standard accommodations, or perhaps to make the accommodation in a case that an expert deems appropriate. Students will go without what they have paid for; moreover, the world will be poorer for the absence of the disabled from positions of responsibility in the wider community.

The response to this argument is that it is premature. It is premature because the liberal education alternative has not actually been tried, at least not at Saint Mary's. Sadly, we as a community of intellectuals and apprentice intellectuals rarely engage in the public discussion and criticism of our methods and goals. If, through critical discussion, we gave less slack for rules and sanctions to take up, administrators would have less reason to want to impose rules and sanctions.

That means we need to start talking about what we are doing and trying to do.

Wouldn't frank discussion violate confidentiality, though—of both professors and students? Yes, but teaching and learning are not areas where confidentiality should matter much to us. Whether professors are teaching well should, for us, be of the widest public interest and concern.