

## **A couple unfortunate union decisions**

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Two recent decisions by the executive of the Saint Mary's University Faculty Union are inconsistent with the purpose of our union.

1) The executive declined to object to the new regulations from our Academic Senate regarding course outlines.

The regulations, which took effect 16 November 2012, come mainly under the heading "Course Descriptions." They require professors to include on their syllabus a course description, a sequence of topics, course objectives, learning outcomes, and the professor's instructional approach. (The Senate Policy on Course Outlines is available at [http://www.smu.ca/webfiles/8-1012\\_SenateCourseOutlines.pdf](http://www.smu.ca/webfiles/8-1012_SenateCourseOutlines.pdf).)

These regulations clearly constitute a violation of academic freedom with regard to teaching. Course syllabi are teaching tools—or, at least, many of us use them as such (for instance, in helping to set the tone of our classrooms).

It's not that there's anything wrong with the content of the regulations, or even with Senate recommending that professors include this or that on their syllabi. Let Senate advise away. The point is, rather, that Senate should not enforce prescribed doctrine regarding syllabi, no matter how sound that doctrine. To require that we professors include course objectives and learning outcomes, for instance, is to reduce our freedom to rely on our own judgement in teaching our courses.

That professors have wide freedom in teaching is a necessary part of liberal education. Wide freedom allows professors to experiment with teaching methods, classroom formats, and pedagogical goals. As well, a central element in liberal education is that students know that their professors have freely chosen their goals and methods and are sincerely committed to all aspects of their courses.

It seems that the Senate intends its regulations to prevent some recurrent dissatisfaction among students at Saint Mary's. It should, though, seek to resolve the problem in local, informal ways. If a professor would do better to include such-and-such on her syllabus, this can be explained to her. Instead of directing professors through edicts, a body such as Senate should draw on a central resource of the university, collegial critical discussion.

The union might be hesitant to object to Senate decisions out of respect for the Senate's position as the highest academic authority at the university and its supposed collegial nature. I don't think these are good reasons be deferential to Senate. After all, only half of its members

are elected professors; a good number of its members are administrators seated *ex officio*. We cannot presume that Senate has academic values at the top of its list.

Rather than accept more administrative oversight and control of teaching, what the union should do is alert the administration that it is ready and willing to grieve on behalf of any professor judged by administrators to have run afoul of the new regulations. In that way, the union will be standing up for and protecting the professional judgement of its members.

I would have thought that protecting our use of our professional judgement is one of our union's most important goals.

2) The CAUT-sponsored Forum for Aboriginal Academic Staff met this year in Toronto to discuss the Role of Aboriginal Academics in Social and Political Change. Our executive sought to find a union member to attend the forum. The executive required, though, that that member be aboriginal.

Our union is right to want to participate in sessions meant to identify difficulties professors face. But all union members should be free to apply to attend such sessions. The decision who to send, if more than one member applies, should be made on the basis of the research interests and accomplishments of the applicants, not on the basis of ethnicity. That, at least, would be the commitment of a professional association concerned with protecting and promoting academics and their work.

Certainly it is worthwhile for the CAUT to investigate the condition of aboriginal academics in Canada. Let the CAUT, then, call together interested people, particularly those who are doing research on the matter, and have them write a scholarly report and provide suggestions for action. The spirit of inquiry and scholarship, though, requires that the researchers involved be involved as researchers and scholars, and not as members of an ethnic group.

Of course, researchers will want to hear from members of the group they are studying. But the forum in Toronto wasn't meant as a gathering of research subjects. It was meant as a gathering of researchers (and activists—activists taking their lead from good research, one hopes). Accomplishment and interest in the field at hand should, then, have been the only qualifications for the union to consider.