

Will deans now begin to speak candidly?

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Will deans and other academic administrators in Canada take advantage of their new-found freedom to be candid about their universities? Or will they continue in their role as organization-men and -women?

They can be candid in public now because of the fallout of the attempt two weeks ago by the University of Saskatchewan to fire Robert Buckingham. Buckingham was Dean of the School of Public Health at U of S when he spoke out about the university's restructuring plan and the threat to apply sanctions against administrators who criticized it.

U of S Provost Brett Fairbairn resigned for his role in the attempt to oust Buckingham, and now U of S president Illene Busch-Vishniac has been fired by the university's board of governors. Buckingham was reinstated as a professor of public health, but not as dean of the school.

In light of the resignation and firing, presidents at other universities in Canada will certainly think twice before moving against a dean who publicly questions university policy.

Just about everyone agrees that a dean removed from his office for speaking out should retain his position as a professor. Opinion among professors and others, though, is divided on whether deans should enjoy the freedom to discuss publicly the policies and direction of their universities.

Some commentators say that deans should be as free as the professors, for the spirit of a university lies in open critical discussion. A dean may properly be removed for failing to carry out her duty, once that is settled by the Academic Senate or the Board of Governors, but not for arguing, even in public, that her duties should be different.

Other commentators fear that allowing deans to speak critically will make their institutions look divided and poorly run. That would harm fund raising and student recruitment. A university is a business, these commentators note. Deans need to be loyal to the process. They must speak candidly to their administrative colleagues in private, of course, but the university functions best when it presents to the world a single face.

Those of us who favour free-speaking deans think this fear is exaggerated. After all, universities are communities of scholars, researchers, artists, intellectuals, and teachers. Their mission isn't to attract students, but to be worthy of the students admitted to them. The idea that a university must have a single direction leads to the abomination of the managed university, in which the collegial spirit of the university gets lost and its teaching mission deteriorates into training young adults for careers.

The best state of affairs, I think, would be one in which presidents or boards of governors retain the right to dismiss deans and other academic administrators, but only use this power wisely—wisely, that is, from the point of view of sound academic principles. Certainly Buckingham's firing was not wise, neither in its manner nor in its rationale. A university president committed to academic values would tolerate quite a bit of dissension among administrators, and if administrations were chosen well, there would, I suspect, be quite a bit of dissension to tolerate. If administrators were chosen well, that is, more of them would be independent-minded and courageous, and would be more inclined temperamentally to discuss policies and events at their institutions, than administrators currently are.

There's certainly plenty for deans to discuss publicly. The sorry state of freedom of expression on campus, for one, and the trend toward career-oriented rather than academic learning, for another. Deans might also want to say something to take the wind out of current fads such as service learning and co-curricular transcripts. And the permission universities are granting businesses and government to set their priorities, and the movement of powers and privileges from departments and lower units to the dean's office and higher units, the growth of oversight and control.... It sure would be useful to know what senior academic administrators really think about these matters.

These days, though, it's hard to find a dean who will speak privately let alone publicly even to defend a university position. Professors who have questions simply get referred to the official documents that record decisions or policies, or at least they do at my university.

That deans fear for their positions if they speak out implies a weakness (I'd say a corruption) in the academic bodies on which they serve in *ex officio* positions (academic senate, for instance). Suppose your university has four deans and a vice-president academic. On any matter of interest to the president that is brought to a body on which these administrators sit, they will constitute a block of five votes: five votes for one mind. *Ex officio* members who fear for their position should they act independently are conduits for the administration's priorities, and only for academic values if the latter happen to coincide with the former.

I doubt many deans will take advantage of their current freedom, partly because even though their jobs as professors might be safe, their position as deans isn't entirely, at least not if they intend to seek reappointment. More significantly, though, the processes by which deans have been hired worked to identify administrative careerists who support the idea of the managed university, and not independent thinkers committed to ideals of higher education.

Professors in Canada were outraged not just by the treatment given Robert Buckingham (being fired as a professor, being escorted from campus and told not to come back), but also by the fact that he was dismissed as dean for publicly standing up for what he took to be sound academic values. I wonder: did this element also outrage the deans?