

247. The values that universities forgot

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Academic freedom and freedom of expression on the university campus can be valued for at least two reasons. One is that freedom promotes the central goals of research and teaching. The other is that only a free university could be a place of intellectual community.

Each is an excellent reason to maintain and protect academic freedom and freedom of expression. But, as recent events have shown us, not all university people care much about either academic freedom or freedom of expression on campus. How could that be?

When I was a younger professor, I thought that all university people would put either intellectual community or the central goals of research and teaching above all else, at least when engaged in university business and at least in times of relative peace and prosperity. University or intellectual values are not the only values worth honouring, of course, and in times of armed conflict, abject poverty, or dictatorship, they might well have to be subordinated to the urgency of our condition. (Although perhaps it is in such circumstances that they would be most useful.) Yet, I thought, if university people in relatively free, fair, and democratic Canada were ever to privilege illiberal values over academic ones, it would be out of rashness, in the heat of an emotional moment. Upon realizing that their actions threatened or infringed upon academic freedom or freedom of expression, they would stop what they were doing and again proceed in the ways academics should.

But then, in early 2006, Peter March, a philosophy colleague at Saint Mary's, taped the Mohammed cartoons from *Jyllands-Posten* to his office door. The administration at Saint Mary's (and, even more sadly, many of the professors here) reacted badly—or, in any case, not as academics who prize research, teaching, or intellectual community should. Surely, I thought, they were violating Dr March's academic freedom and dampening freedom of expression on campus simply out of bad judgement. Blinded in the fog of conflicting values, they would correct themselves once they understood what they were doing.

I publicly opposed their actions and communicated my arguments to the administrators. Yet with each new development in the Peter March affair, administrators continued to betray academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus. Administrators continued, although fully conscious of what they were doing, to sacrifice academic values to such non-academic

values as avoiding offence and promoting harmony, even when those non-academic values were hardly in peril.

Dr March was brought before a tribunal (two professors and a student) that was charged to determine whether he had harassed anyone or discriminated against anyone in his actions or speech. When it became clear that the tribunal would find what was obvious—that posting cartoons and talking about them could not possibly constitute harassment or discrimination—the complaining students were advised to withdraw their complaint. They did so, thereby preventing what would have been a useful campus precedent.

From March to worse

In the years following the Peter March affair, our administration, often with support from professors and our union, has acted weakly or wrongly (wrongly from an academic point of view) whenever freedom of expression on campus was at stake: when the talk by an invited speaker was disrupted; when the students' association took exception to a student society's sign; when the Queer society proposed an event for orientation week; and in the aftermath of 2013's rape chant. (The assault on academic values continues today with the meddlesome and censorious work of the Action Team for a Respectful Campus.)

Back in 2006, there were few voices decrying our administration's disdain for academic freedom and freedom of expression. On the contrary, the faculty union at Saint Mary's tended to support it, as did the Canadian Association of University Teachers.

One organization did stand up for freedom of expression at Saint Mary's: The Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS). SAFS sent a letter to our university's president and posted the letter on its website. I was impressed, and I joined SAFS a few months later. In 2009, I was elected to the Board of Directors, and in May, 2015, after long-serving president Clive Seligman stepped down, I became the fourth president of the 25-year-old organization.

SAFS is dedicated to "Maintaining freedom in teaching, research and scholarship" and "Maintaining standards of excellence in academic decisions about students and faculty." We're an advocacy and education organization. We write letters to university presidents and others defending academic values when our board judges them to have been infringed or put at risk. We publish a newsletter and organize symposia in which the things we care about get discussed and debated. (Over the last year, we have held a panel discussion on initiatives to indigenize the university and on pseudo-science and academic freedom.)

Since the beginning of the current school year, SAFS has been engaged in three prominent cases involving the subjugation of academic freedom or freedom of expression on campus.

Black October

In early October, administrators at Western University, in London, Ontario, reacted to photos on social media of four students posing under a banner reading "Western Lives Matter" by

formally investigating whether the students had violated Western's student code of conduct. Although that code explicitly states that nothing in it "shall be construed ... to inhibit free speech," administrators said that trivializing the Black Lives Matter movement could violate people's human rights. (After the investigation, no students were disciplined. "It did not rise to the threshold as a code violation under our student code," said Western's associate vice-president of student experience, thereby implying that peacefully criticising or making fun of a political movement could very well violate a code that says it protects freedom of expression.)

Also in October, University of Lethbridge professor Anthony Hall was suspended without pay because of allegations that some of his social media postings were anti-Semitic. Dr Hall was suspended, that is, before the allegations were tested and independently of any expressed worries about the quality of his research or teaching. Of course, even if the postings were indeed anti-Semitic, universities attentive to academic values would be neutral with regard to the content of peaceful expressions of opinion or emotion.

Finally, and most prominently, on 18 October, University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson was sent a letter, signed by the dean of the faculty of arts and science and the vice-provost of faculty and academic life, urging Dr Peterson to accede to requests he might receive from students or colleagues to use their preferred pronoun rather than his own and to stop saying publicly that he will refuse such requests. Failing to accede, the letter said, is "contrary to the rights of those persons to equal treatment without discrimination"; acting contrary to those rights would be in violation of the "responsibilities of faculty members to establish 'fair and ethical dealings with students,' as well as with colleagues." Dr Peterson's persistence in his "discriminatory intentions" had been "emotionally disturbing and painful" to members of the university community and had caused some of them "to fear for their safety on the University campus."

When the U of T organized a debate on the issues, the union that represents part-time faculty members objected. In an open letter, the union wrote: "Despite the administration's welcome stance on respecting pronouns, we are deeply troubled to learn that the University is providing a forum for what Peterson has termed a 'free speech debate.' We object to the basic premise of this event. Human rights are not up for debate. We urge members of the University community to boycott this event."

The union of graduate students likewise came out against free and open debate. "In agreeing to host future debates on the themes challenged by Peterson and his supporters, the University of Toronto Administration has proven irresponsible in providing Peterson a continued platform to promote discrimination at the expense of students."

What universities should be

The actions taken by administrators and unions in these three cases need to be considered in relation to the central goals of teaching and research and of intellectual community.

"Research" is a broad term that covers at least three sorts of activity in which professors and students engage. One is inquiry into the ways of the world. The goal is to figure out how

things are, or to come as close as one can to figuring out how they are. Another is the interpretation of artistic and other cultural artifacts and expressions. A third is the emotional and intellectual appreciation of the world as understood through inquiry and by interpretation.

“Teaching” is of course the dissemination of the products of research and interpretation to students. But its goal is not only to make students knowledgeable. Teaching is primarily aimed at helping students to become researchers, interpreters, and appreciators themselves.

Figuring out how things are and producing and appreciating interpretations of their meaning is much better attempted in an atmosphere of freedom than in one of constraint. Academic freedom and freedom of expression increase the likelihood that we will get things right and help others to do so. That is because they multiply the options we can discuss and test.

Intellectual community is formed when people come together in an institution to pursue inquiry, interpretation, and appreciation together. There are two reasons for intellectuals to gather together. First, through collaboration and critical discussion, inquiry and the rest become more productive. Second, by coming together in community, people enjoy the pleasures of collaboration and critical discussion. Intellectuals aspire to develop insightful theories and interpretations, and they enjoy presenting their work to others and discussing the work of others with them.

Academic freedom and freedom of expression do not serve simply to improve intellectual community; rather, they are necessary for it to exist in the first place. Researchers and interpreters care about getting things right, certainly. They want to believe truly and to value soundly. But they also deeply care about believing what one believes and valuing what one values for one’s own good reasons. The only good reasons for believing or valuing are the reasons of evidence, argument, and example. To believe or value because of social or other pressures isn’t to believe or value for one’s own reasons, even if one happens to believe truly and value soundly.

Intellectuals and scholars, then, aspire to be intellectually and morally autonomous. Because they value autonomy for themselves and for all members of their community, they refrain from the controlling behaviours exhibited in the examples from Western, Lethbridge, and Toronto.

The university administrators and other officers who investigated the students, suspended Dr Hall, ordered Dr Peterson to mind his words and manners, and called for an end to debate, are in fundamental conflict with the goals of research and teaching and the ideals of intellectual community. They do not think of universities as places of liberal study. Indeed, their actions are antithetical to liberal study.

The new academic utilitarianism

Goals other than liberal study around which university life can be organized include the training of experts and professionals, the creation of a professional or managerial class, and the inculcation of preferred attitudes and values (respect for diversity, for instance, or concern for sustainability or citizenship). At universities that pursue such goals, academic freedom and

freedom of expression are unneeded and can be a nuisance. Critical discussions of, for instance, just what human rights we have (if any) can be emotionally and even psychologically upsetting for some; thus, they are an unwelcome diversion from the utilitarian purpose of the university. While an intellectual welcomes such a discussion even in face of the risk, for an administrator hoping to bring members of historically marginalized groups into a society's cadre of experts and managers, the risk is unacceptable.

I would like to be able to claim that the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship has had some success in maintaining universities as places of liberal study—as places devoted to intellectual community and the goals of research and teaching. But I can't be sure. Still, it is possible that the observations and arguments that SAFS communicated to Western were part of the reason the students were exonerated. And perhaps our efforts have contributed to Dr Peterson's continuing employment at the U of T.

But the most important task of SAFS, now and in the long term, is to keep alive and to nurture the idea of the university as a place for dispassionate inquiry, of study for the sake of study. The idea of intellectual and moral autonomy is for many people extremely powerful, if only they hear of it and know that at least some others out there cherish it.

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