

Knowledge and the university

The Newsletter of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, Number 76, April 2017
<http://www.safs.ca/newsletters/2017/april/14%20Mark%20Mercer%20KNOWLEDGE%20AND%20THE%20UNIVERSITY.pdf>

Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(902) 420-5825
mark.mercer@smu.ca

On one view, universities are institutions of knowledge above all else. They collect or create or extend it, and catalogue and preserve it. They teach it to their students and disseminate it widely. They are supported by public funds to do this because knowledge is useful; if one works from knowledge, one will succeed. (More to the point: to work from ignorance or error is to court disaster. Children die of measles; bridges twist in the wind and collapse.)

That the university is a champion of knowledge against error and ignorance and must preserve its reputation as such underlies positions on all sorts of topics. Here are some: the incorporation of indigenous lore in science curricula; extra-curricular talks and events; directorships of institutes; accreditation; the involvement of administrators in hiring, academic planning, and the like; whether professors should refrain from speaking outside their areas of specialization; and the extent to which professional groups, such as the Modern Languages Association, should guide the disciplines.

There are alternatives to the university as place of knowledge. Some are worse: the university as credentialing agency, for instance, or as an instrument for socializing youth into currently preferred attitudes and values. At least one alternative is better. Universities might organize themselves around the idea that they are places for dispassionate inquiry, interpretation, and discussion.

Many criticisms of the knowledge-factory idea are worth discussing—that much at universities is about know-how, and not knowledge; that much at universities is about meaning and interpretation; that teaching has little to do with getting students to know things; that reputations have little to do with desert; that policing and defending the knowledge factory will consume resources and weary the workers—but I'll sketch just one.

To certify something as knowledge we need to know that we know it. But our attempts to know that we know can lead only to regress, circularity, or dogmatism. Since, then, we can never know of something that we know it, we can never sincerely certify for the consumer that what she is getting is in fact knowledge.

A wrong-headed objection to my criticism is that some things are indeed known to be true and it's not dogmatism to protect them using rules and authority. A tougher objection is that sometimes dogmatism is just what is needed (children; bridges).