

259. Investigations into outspoken professors smother intellectual inquiry

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Suppose you're a first year university student with questions or ideas about the wage gap between men and women, or about the effects of immigration on crime or culture, or about the psychology of people who reject their birth gender, or about differences in taste or temperament between the sexes, or about rape culture, or about the proper business of a faculty union, or about the residential schools....

Suppose also you are a student at Acadia University.

Will you feel free to pursue these topics fearlessly and out in the open? Or will you be cautious and guarded, afraid to consider certain points of view or arguments, careful not to be caught saying the wrong thing, even if merely in speculation?

Since you are aware of what's happening currently to psychology professor Rick Mehta, you'll certainly be cautious and guarded, if you don't decide to avoid these important topics altogether. Perhaps, in the spirit of getting along or getting ahead, you'll simply give up investigating and thinking in favour of parroting the party line.

Rick Mehta is the Acadia University professor now under investigation by his school for his outspoken defence of views that many in the Acadia community think not only false but pernicious. Because they are false and pernicious, he needs to keep them to himself, or at least so demand some Acadia students, professors, and administrators.

Heather Hemming, the Vice President, Academic, at Acadia, informed Dr Mehta that "the University has a legal responsibility to provide an environment free from discrimination, sexual harassment and personal harassment." But how could outspokenness, no matter what views on what topic, constitute discrimination or harassment?

Certainly Dr Mehta would have been harassing others if he had been following them in the halls preaching his views to them (after they had asked him to stop, of course), or blocking their path, or sending them email messages (after they had asked him to stop, of course). But nothing that looks like discrimination or harassment is mentioned in Dr Hemming's letter or present in the public record. So Dr Hemming's concern would seem to be simply with what Dr Mehta has been saying.

Now one argument that the mere content of someone's speech can be harassing is that hearing certain ideas can be disturbing to a particular listener, perhaps constitute an assault on one's identity, and that can create a hostile environment in which to learn. Since the university should be a welcoming place to all, it should police what people say to make sure no one, or no one from a historically marginalized group, at least, has to hear anything upsetting.

A university, though, is a place for intellectuals and people who aspire to be intellectuals. To be welcoming to intellectuals and aspiring intellectuals, a university cannot rule any topics or views out of bounds. At a university, to interfere with the free expression of opinion and emotion is to turn away from inquiry and education and to favour indoctrination.

Another argument that universities should police what is said on campus begins from the idea that universities are places of reason and authority. Because they are such places, ideas and proposals gain credibility or legitimacy just by being spoken and discussed on campus. Universities, the argument concludes, have a responsibility not to promote bad or harmful ideas; thus, for the sake of the wider society, only reasonable and beneficial ideas should be heard on campus.

One problem with this argument is that no authority should be entrusted with the power to distinguish between good and bad ideas. That is what discussion itself is for.

The deeper problem is that any amount of oversight and control immediately lowers the reputation of the institution as a producer of knowledge. People are right to trust the results of university research; or, at least, they are right to trust them more than the results of research done by business or industry or commissioned by political parties. Universities, people think, don't have an axe to grind or an agenda to push. University researchers are free to go where the argument leads.

But they are not free to go where the argument leads, people will correctly conclude, if university people are not allowed to hold certain views or to say certain things. How much faith will people have in the social scientific research coming out of Acadia, when they know that Acadia researchers must toe the university line on certain matters? Investigating Rick Mehta damages the credibility of those at Acadia who, say, are looking into the residential schools.

Investigating Rick Mehta for expressing his views on the matters of the day is contrary both to the ideal of the university as a place of inquiry and discussion and to the usefulness of research at Acadia to Canadian society generally.