

260. A university that understands its mission will not vet campus events

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Should universities oversee and approve what happens on their campuses?

Wilfrid Laurier professor Steve Wilcox thinks they should. Professor Wilcox would have Laurier put a stop to a campus debate on abortion, scheduled for Thursday April 5th. (“Pro-life club asks Lindsay Shepherd to MC campus abortion debate,” *Waterloo Region Record*, 27 March <https://www.therecord.com/news-story/8352519-pro-life-club-asks-lindsay-shepherd-to-mc-campus-abortion-debate/>)

Because the debate is organized by the student group Laurier Lifelink, Professor Wilcox doubts the event will have validity. He is also critical of the choice of moderator, Barbara Kay, as Ms Kay is by and large on the pro-life side. (Ms Kay does not think all abortions should be illegal. She advocates regulation, and calls herself a moderate on the question.) Finally, obstetrician Dr Fraser Fellows, who performs abortions and will speak on the pro-choice side, is not, according to Professor Wilcox, “someone who is probably the best candidate to actually defend that side of it.”

Well, Professor Wilcox is entitled to his opinion, and, who knows?, he could be right. But why should the university step in to ensure that this debate—invalid, one-sided, and incompetently argued as it might be—not take place?

Because, says Professor Wilcox, “campuses have a social responsibility to build on knowledge and to respect human rights.”

My view is that were it to interfere with the event, Laurier would in fact undermine its social responsibility and betray its mission as a place of education. A good university does not vet the activities of professors, students, or campus groups. Being a place of education requires that members of the campus community be free to host debates and discussions, and to present movies and lectures, just as they wish—however obnoxious, offensive, or invalid the event is.

But before giving my argument, let us understand better what is behind the call for universities to vet proposals and projects.

First, a university is a serious and even a grand place. People come to a university campus to be elevated. But events featuring ignorant, stupid, or incompetent participants cheapen the campus.

As well, an idea gains a degree of legitimacy just by having been spoken or discussed on a university campus. Even a small degree of legitimacy can help a bad idea to catch on in the wider society and, thereby, become dangerous. A university fulfils its social responsibility, then, only if it reserves its platforms for good ideas.

Finally, a university has a responsibility to help students meet their potential. To meet their potential, students need to feel valued by their institution. But when students hear on campus their race or sex being denigrated, they know they are not valued.

Therefore, in order to minimize the threat of an event tarnishing the university's reputation, propelling a dangerous idea forward, or creating a hostile environment for learning, the administration must take an interest in what community members are proposing and it must possess power enough to put the brakes on misguided plans and endeavours.

Now the problem with these arguments is that they don't rest on a sound conception of what a university is like and what a university is for. Universities are primarily places for intellectuals to gather in community as intellectuals, or at least that is what they should be.

Intellectuals want to understand the world and to value the things in it soundly, certainly. University people, that is, care about the true and the good. But they want even more to believe truly and to value soundly on the basis of evidence and argument only, and not because of social or other pressures, and least of all because they have been manipulated or indoctrinated.

And thus they must be left free to investigate and interpret and discuss as they will. Left free, that is, of the fear of punishment and the temptation of reward. They must not be left free of criticism, for criticism reforms and sharpens their understanding and, moreover, is an expression of respect for their peers.

A university that vets the campus proposals of professors and students, then, seeks to apply to campus investigations and discussions the criterion of utility to non-academic goals such as reputation and social usefulness and comfort.

We don't want ignoramuses, dunderheads, or mountebanks on campus wasting our time. Nonetheless, professors and students need to be allowed to make mistakes, to drive down a dead-end street now and then. They need to be free to make mistakes if they are to learn, that is, to learn on their own terms, so that they don't merely parrot what they have been told.

Again, criticism is indispensable. If you are disappointed that a pro-choice speaker fails to make the best case, then make that case yourself. Publish in the campus newspaper or book a lecture hall. If the discussion groups on your campus invariably invite empty blowhards, join them and make some better suggestions—or form your own group and show the rest how it is supposed to be done.

Professor Wilcox advocates administrative interference on grounds of building knowledge. I would have the administration limit itself to the fair distribution of resources on grounds of developing critical faculties and creating individual understandings.

About human rights I suppose the two of us disagree, for I'm of the last generation (it seems) to have held that the civil liberties *were* human rights. They are, at least, the indispensable social and educational condition for nurturing independent thought.