

271. Why LAC should not have rescinded its invitation to Harvey Mansfield

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What could be a good enough reason to rescind an invitation to a professor to give a talk?

Harvey Mansfield, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Government at Harvard University, had been invited to give the keynote address at the 40th Anniversary Alumni reunion of Liberal Arts College (LAC), a small undergraduate program at Montréal's Concordia University. The gala was to take place in May, but, late in March, Mark Russell, the principal of LAC, rescinded the invitation and postponed the celebration.

According to *The Link*, a campus paper at LAC, Dr Mansfield was disinvited because of his published views on gender and culture, which some faculty members at LAC believe to be "damaging and discredited."

Faculty members at Liberal Arts College would not rescind an invitation lightly, one would expect. First of all, it's just plain discourteous to invite a speaker and then to tell him not to come. Second, other people the LAC will want to bring on campus are going to be leery of accepting an invitation. Apart from registering their disapproval of how LAC treated Dr Mansfield, they won't want to risk putting in time and effort only to be brushed away. Third, LAC's vacillation and Principal Russell's remarks that the college was "unable to reach consensus as to what we wanted to achieve with this event" convey the message that LAC is unsure of its mission and image, which is not a message with which to attract students or supporters.

As well, Dr Mansfield had been invited to speak on the liberal arts and on liberal arts education, topics about which he has thought long and hard. Professors and students who argued to rescind the invitation must, then, regret as much as anyone else losing an opportunity to discuss liberal arts education with an expert on the topic.

For these reasons, those members of the LAC faculty who pressed the college to rescind the invitation must have been convinced that bringing Dr Mansfield to campus was a mistake serious enough to need correcting even at substantial cost.

From what I know of universities and their current difficulties with free and open discussion, as well as with unorthodox social and political views, I would say that the objecting professors had one or more of four popular arguments in mind.

The professors might have thought that disinviting Dr Mansfield was the best among the available courses of action because disinviting him would prevent harm to vulnerable students or other community members. Students would be put at risk of harm even if Dr Mansfield spoke none of his damaging views on gender or culture, for knowing that someone who holds his views is on campus as a guest of the college could be depressing or stressful enough.

The thesis that students are unable to withstand shocks to their values and identities, though, is false. Indeed, such shocks are necessary if students are to acquire emotional resiliency. Moreover, part of the mission of a university as a forum for discussion is to bring

students into contact with informed and well-argued positions that disturb or upset them, so that their understanding might be deepened and so that they learn to come to think for themselves.

Another possibility is that the professors feared that some students might come to accept Dr Mansfield's discredited views. The college, then, would have failed to teach them well. Or, having been persuaded by Dr Mansfield's arguments, students might act on their new sexist or genderist attitudes, thereby causing harm to others, at least by forestalling needed social or political changes.

This worry rests on the idea that the goal of education is to instil the correct attitudes in young people, rather than helping them to acquire the ability to think and to judge for themselves. A college of liberal arts, though, values and promotes intellectual and moral autonomy.

A third possibility is that Dr Mansfield's visit to LAC as an honoured guest would have lowered the tone of the institution. Universities are serious places in which difficult topics are examined rigorously. Dr Mansfield, though, some contend, is more a provocateur than a deep thinker and dispassionate investigator. LAC has an obligation to protect and promote intellectual life on its campus and beyond, and honouring Dr Mansfield would express disdain for that obligation.

This is perhaps the least plausible of the three arguments, for even if Dr Mansfield is a provocateur of a sort, he is certainly learned and argumentative. But, implausible it though it appears, it might be behind the disinvitation, for other obviously learned and argumentative people have been accused of being charlatans or firebrands whose presence degrades the campus environment. Jordan Peterson is one example; Rachel Fulton Brown, another.

The last possibility is that it was worth disinviting Dr Mansfield despite the cost because it presented the college with a tremendous opportunity to signal its virtue.

Professors at Liberal Arts College must have been aware that rescinding the invitation to Dr Mansfield not only was discourteous but would, as it has, do great damage to the college. LAC has put its commitment to freedom of inquiry, freedom of discussion, and freedom of expression in doubt. Since liberal education requires freedom of inquiry, discussion, and expression, LAC has raised doubts about its commitment to its mission. And yet people at the college somehow imagined that all things considered, disinviting Dr Mansfield was the best of all possible courses of action.