

273. Academic philistinism

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Most universities endorse the principle that the university itself is to make no official statement on matters of fact.

The General Faculties Council at the University of Alberta, for instance, recently approved a statement on Freedom of Expression that contains the following injunction: “It is for individuals, not the institution, to make those judgments for themselves....”

Nonetheless, universities violate the principle regularly. One example comes from the University of Alberta itself.

On 20 November, U of A education lecturer Dougal MacDonald took to Facebook to post his view that Stalin was not responsible for the Holodomor (the 1932-33 famine in the Ukraine) and that the accusation that he was is anti-Soviet propaganda.

Deputy provost Wendy Rogers was speaking in her official capacity when she responded, “Mr. MacDonald’s views do not represent those of the University of Alberta. As a private citizen, Mr. MacDonald has the right to express his opinion, and others have the right to critique or debate that opinion. It is our understanding that he has not expressed these views in the context of his employment relationship with the university.”

Lesley Cormack, Dean of Arts, and Jennifer Tupper, Dean of Education, issued a joint statement: “We, as the Dean of Education and the Dean of Arts, wish to state categorically that this (MacDougal’s claim that the Holodomor is ‘fictitious’, ‘a myth concocted by the Hitlerite Nazis to discredit the Soviet Union’) is not true.”

“As the Dean of Education and the Dean of Arts”—not as critics among interested peers putting forth their own view.

The University of Alberta took no action against Mr MacDougal, though Dr Rogers, as well as associating her university with a particular view, seemed to have been cautioning Mr MacDougal not to speak to his students about the Holodomor, or else.

The rationale behind the principle the U of A both affirms and ignores is that when universities as institutions take a stand on a matter of fact, they potentially inhibit professors and students from discussing the relevant issue openly and candidly. The university has spoken. Those who dissent (or remain unsure) are putting themselves at risk of censure. They are, at least, at risk of incurring the opprobrium of the orthodox at their institutions, for the orthodox may well think themselves justified by the institution in calling out the heretics.

Certainly anyone who wishes to join a university’s administration in the future had better be sure to speak in line with their university’s positions.

By staying quiet about the facts or their accurate interpretation or meaning, a university encourages the members of its intellectual community to investigate freely and to discuss things

openly and candidly, for no one has to wonder what will happen to them should they run afoul of the view that has the universities imprimatur. As well, that the university has no official line reinforces the public's trust of the research that emanates from it. (Can Albertans now be sure that historians at the U of A who study the Ukraine are honest and independent researchers, free and keen to pursue the topic as they wish and draw the conclusions they think warranted?)

The principle that the university itself is to make no official statement on matters of fact is not easy to formulate. The address of the university, the departments within it, the times and places of the scheduled classes, what the university policy on plagiarism is—these are all matters of fact that surely the university can pronounce on authoritatively. Formulating the principle in terms of controversial matters or matters of contemporary academic interest won't do, for anything at any time could become controversial or a topic of interest.

To interpret the principle as a live, structuring injunction within an academic institution, one needs to understand and appreciate its purpose. If the culture of a university is one of intellectual community in both research and teaching, university administrators will not even think to associate their institutions with particular accounts of what the facts are in areas members of the community might want to investigate. They won't be inclined to have their universities say what is true and what isn't because of their commitment to free, open, and candid research and discussion. That administrators don't mind having their universities declare the truth is both symptom and cause of their lack of commitment.

Now why would administrators, and professors and students, as well, want their university to take a public stance on one or another matter? Why wouldn't they leave taking stances to the individual professors and students, and let them inquire into the matter and criticize each other's methods, thinking, and findings? Why would they, indeed, risk narrowing and inhibiting the discussion?

Because, it would seem, there's more at stake than the academic mission and the academic culture that supports it. Failing to endorse a certain view of history or culture or a people's aspirations can intensify the hurt or offense caused by the original statement.

"The Ukrainian Students' Society is extremely disturbed and ashamed that a University of Alberta Faculty member has expressed this hateful behaviour. We are appalled to have these false beliefs associated with our campus and our organization and insist that immediate action is taken."

The university is "committed to ensuring a diverse, equitable and inclusive learning and working environment," replied Deputy Provost Rogers replied.

Whether the topic is rape culture, Trans, residential schools, race, bullying, feminism, vaccination, climate change, child pornography, immigration, men's rights, human rights, or civil liberties—diversity, inclusion, and equity, understood (only) as they are officially understood, require that discussion be monitored and guided.

Now, is this a bad thing? It isn't, one might argue, because one part of the university's mission is teaching, and teaching cannot occur when students feel unwelcome or undervalued, and hearing certain opinions expressed, and then not condemned by their university, can lead them to feel unwelcome or undervalued. But this is to misunderstand the purpose and nature of university teaching. University teaching is to help students to acquire a new, additional identity, that of scholars, researchers, and intellectuals. It is not to confirm them in an identity they already possess. Intellectuals wish to understand things as they are, and, further, to fashion and hold their understandings on grounds of evidence and argument. Interfering with the ethos of the

university in order to avoid offense and hurt prevents students from coming to live by and appreciate intellectual autonomy.

In the end, then, universities that attempt to disassociate themselves from views held by members of their campus communities, and to associate themselves with the proper views (even when the proper views are the true and sound views), are declaring that they value their academic mission much less than they value some social mission. They are, after all, seeking to promote the latter at the expense of the former.