

Introduction to University: Lecture Four

Academic freedom for professors, librarians, and other members of the teaching or research and teaching staff

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Professors and other members of the academic staff at most universities in Canada possess a large degree of freedom in research, teaching, expression, and association.

Research

A professor at a university who possesses full academic freedom may conduct research into whatever topic she wishes. In conducting research, she may employ whatever methods she prefers, consistent, of course, with public law. She may draw whatever conclusions she wishes from her research. And she may disseminate her research to whomever she wants, however she wants to disseminate it.

Academic freedom in research requires that university officers charged with evaluating a professor's research for promotion or other business judge that research using academic standards only. They may not, that is, discipline or sanction the professor, or deny her tenure or promotion, for anything controversial, offensive, or disturbing in her work.

Teaching

A professor teaching at a university who possesses full academic freedom will set the syllabus for his courses as he wishes. He may teach his courses using whatever materials he wishes and in whatever pedagogical style he favours. He will have been involved in decisions about which courses he teaches.

Academic freedom in teaching requires that university officers charged with evaluating teaching must consider only the teacher's success in imparting the understandings and skills of her discipline to her students. They may not discipline or sanction the professor for exposing her students to unsavoury material or for using unorthodox teaching methods.

Teachers can, of course, be disciplined or fired for grading their students unfairly and for treating them unethically. Academic freedom requires that complaints about unfairness or mistreatment be investigated by a properly-constituted body that applies only the standards specified in the collective agreement.

Expression and association

A professor at a university who enjoys academic freedom possesses a larger degree of freedom of expression than most other people do. Not only may he say or write or post publicly whatever he wishes, or engage in creative endeavours or demonstrate for causes, without fear of sanction by the government. He may do these things also without fear of sanction by his

employer. He may, without fear of sanction, criticise his university or its officers publicly. (Workers at restaurants or banks do not possess this freedom. Sadly, members of the non-academic staff at a university rarely possess it.)

A professor may invite speakers to campus as he wishes, and he can expect that university security will safeguard the integrity of his classes and the campus events with which he is involved, no matter how hostile members of the university community might be toward them.

Finally, a professor may associate with whomever she wishes and may engage off-campus in whatever business or fun she wishes, without facing discipline or sanction.

Protecting academic freedom

A professor's academic freedom is protected through various formal and informal institutions and customs. It is, first of all, a right won in collective bargaining, and stated in the contract under which the professor is employed. (Because collective agreements differ university to university, professors at one university might enjoy more or less freedom than professors at another university.) It is also formally protected through the institution of tenure. Formal agreements set out structures of due process to deal with complaints from students, colleagues, or administrators about professors and other academic staff members.

Less formally, academic freedom is protected by the university's academic senate and by university self-governance. As always, formal protections for academic freedom mean little apart from the willingness of professors and administrators to defend academic freedom against threats and violations. Where this willingness is lacking, freedom can go wanting even when guaranteed by the plain words of a collective agreement.

Other important protections include organizations such as the Canadian Association of University Teachers and the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship. These groups are sensitive to violations of and threats to academic freedom and are committed to working on behalf of those whose freedom has been compromised and against university policies that threaten academic freedom.

Responsibilities

While academic freedom is freedom from social and economic pressures, it is not freedom from criticism. On the contrary: it imposes a responsibility on professors to criticise their colleagues and to listen to criticism. Professors need to be concerned with the quality both of their own and of their colleagues' research and teaching. They are obliged to evaluate critically their colleagues' public pronouncements and to hear criticism of their own public pronouncements.

Professors have the responsibility to criticise their colleague's research, teaching, and pronouncements. They also have the responsibility to criticise in a manner consistent with the spirit of academic freedom. That is, their criticism should be directed toward the truth of claims and the soundness of arguments. Means of criticism outside the spirit of academic freedom include petitions and demonstrations against their colleagues, and academic boycotts. These means are inconsistent with the spirit of academic freedom for they are attempts to apply pressures other than those of argument and example.

Reasons for valuing academic freedom

Academic freedom is a right won in collective bargaining and present in collective agreements; it is, therefore, as legitimate as any provision won fairly in labour negotiation. But why should professors possess it? How does it serve the proper functions of the university?

There are two sorts of impersonal reason for valuing academic freedom. The first is that academic freedom promotes the creation and dissemination of understanding. The second is that academic freedom is constitutive of an intellectual's way of life, a way of life in which members of a community value their own and each others' autonomy and integrity above all.

Threats to academic freedom

Historically, intellectuals have enjoyed very little formal protection for their ideas and their way of life. For the most part, thinkers and scientists have had to form communities outside the mainstreams of their societies and they've had to be careful to keep to themselves. It is only in the past half-century or so that public universities have sought to protect the way of life of intellectuals.

The freedom most professors enjoy these days is both wide and well protected. Nonetheless, academic freedom is always at risk. Current threats to it include: 1) the demands of funding agencies, such as businesses and government, to direct their money toward their goals; 2) university research ethics boards, which often place more strictures on researchers than the law does; 3) the desire among professors or administrators that their university serve a particular social or political agenda; 4) the ideology according to which having a safe and respectful university environment requires policing expression and manners to protect people's sense of identity or self-worth; 5) administrators' concerns that the university not acquire a reputation that might cause it to lose funding or students; and 6) reliance on part-time and other untenured faculty, who might hesitate to speak candidly or to make the results of their research public for fear of putting their chance of gaining permanent employment in jeopardy.