

## Introduction to University, Lecture Five

### **Rights and Responsibilities of Students**

Mark Mercer  
Department of Philosophy  
Saint Mary's University  
923 Robie Street  
Halifax, NS B3H 3T7  
[mark.mercer@smu.ca](mailto:mark.mercer@smu.ca)

The **rights** a person has as a student at a university are embodied in just those procedures, institutions, and freedoms necessary or useful for 1) acquiring the skills and understandings of an intellectual and 2) living as an (aspiring) intellectual within a community of intellectuals.

As rights, students' rights are—or, at least, they should be—backed up by safeguards and procedures set by the university. Safeguards include the university's concern that members of the university community know the rights that students have and why they have these rights. Procedures include those by which students may complain when they believe their rights have been violated or are under threat, those by which complaints are heard and fairly evaluated, and those by which complaints with merit find their remedy.

Rights, we're often told, come with responsibilities. It's not clear that that's true, at least if the thought is that a person who uses a right irresponsibly may with justice be deprived of that right. If we have a right to say what we want, then we have a right to say what we want even though we speak irresponsibly. Anyone who cautions that your possessing or exercising a right is contingent on your exercising it responsibly doesn't understand the concept of a right. He or she has confused rights with privileges.

The **responsibilities** a person has as a student come in two sorts, those that a student may not violate without earning an official sanction or penalty and those that a student may violate as he or she wishes.

Among the first sort is the responsibility to pay tuition and fees. A student who shirks this responsibility is out on the street, no longer a student. Another is the responsibility to drop a course by the drop date.

Among the second sort is the responsibility to attend class. Another is the responsibility to read carefully the course material. Responsibilities of the second sort are responsibilities to engage in or abide by activities or customs necessary or useful for acquiring knowledge and skills or for maintaining a community of intellectuals. If you shirk a responsibility of the second sort, you risk getting poor grades. Moreover, your behavior threatens to degrade the experience of university of your classmates and professors. But whether you shirk a responsibility of the second sort, and, thereby, take the risks or cause some trouble, is your business.

So what rights does a university student, as a student, possess? Any short list will include

- the right to study in any programme in which she is qualified (according to academic criteria alone) to study
- the right to be taught well
- the right to have her work evaluated on academic grounds alone, and to be evaluated soundly on these grounds
- the right to hear from her professor why he criticized or evaluated her work as he did
- the right to use the library and any other campus facility necessary or useful to her studies
- the right to have adequate and comfortable study space, and to have adequate and comfortable classrooms
- the right to express herself freely, both inside and outside the classroom (this includes the right to speak ill of her university, her teachers, her classmates)
- the right to associate with whom she wishes
- the right to form campus clubs or societies, and to receive university funds or resources for clubs or societies according to a fair scheme
- the right to invite visiting speakers to campus
- the right to attend classes and campus events free from disruption
- the right to due process in any academic or non-academic disciplinary matter
- the right to speak to the professor about any aspect of the course (topics, materials, means of evaluation, teaching style, classroom management, accommodations for disabilities) and to receive a response
- no right to choose any aspect of the course and ignore others, no right to force any changes

I include on my own list the right to have her application to study at the university appraised in light of academic criteria alone (and appraised soundly on these criteria). Many universities today, though, give preference to applicants who belong to certain income, racial, ethnic, etc. groups. They attempt to justify departing from academic criteria on the grounds either that their social mission requires it or that having more members of these groups on campus than academic criteria alone would bring makes for a better university experience for everyone.

Two rights can, of course, conflict with each other in particular contexts. One student's right to speak his mind might compromise another student's right to attend a class free of disruption. Such conflicts are actually quite rare. When someone disrupts a class or other event, the disruption typically involves the volume, manner, or length of time that that person has chosen to use to express himself, not the content of his expression.

These rights are best safeguarded by a university's informal institutional culture. When administrators and professors are keen to respect students' rights out of their dedication to creating and maintaining a community of intellectuals, these rights are not at risk at all. When concerns other than creating and maintaining a community of intellectuals motivate administrators and professors, though, students' rights—along with academic freedom and the teaching and research missions of the university—can easily come to grief.