

Saving the integrity of the university: A response to “Women’s rights or religious rights: which comes first?”

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Here’s a pernicious idea: Universities are diverse societies, microcosms of our own diverse Canadian society. It’s nonsense, of course. Universities are as mono-cultural as institutions can be. But the idea that they are diverse societies has enough surface plausibility for it to have gained traction on campuses across the country and, thereby, to have begun to change universities for the worse.

Universities are places of teaching and research, of inquiry and interpretation, of art and ideas, of discussion and debate. They are spaces, in short, in which people gather in order to live the life of the mind. That is what gives them such a strong single focus. That is why university people are at home on a university campus wherever in the world that campus might be.

Universities, certainly, display a wide variety of courses, academic departments, research interests, styles of teaching, and ways of being an academic. Some academics are scholars, some are scientists, some are artists, some are interpreters of art or culture or politics, some are intellectuals; most try to fuse two, three, or more of these orientations, usually successfully. Because of the way intellectual commitments among professors and students average out over a university, two excellent universities might feature strikingly different intellectual cultures.

Nonetheless, what makes both universities excellent will be one single thing: their effective devotion to the life of the mind.

The surface plausibility in the idea that universities are diverse societies resides in the fact that people from all sorts of backgrounds are drawn to the life of mind. All sorts of skin colours, and ethnic and national origins and affiliations, are found among university people, and university people can differ radically from one another in what matters to them outside the life of the mind.

Yet, whatever differences we might note among university people, they pale into insignificance when compared to the difference between university culture and civilian culture. University culture involves the strenuous interrogation and examination of everything from cabbages to kings. Such interrogation puts all aspects of the university person’s identity at risk, even his or her identity as a university person. No other way of life is like it; no other way of life would dare to be like it. (That last claim is tautologous, for any way of life that takes up the strenuous examination of things thereby becomes the life of the mind.)

What makes the idea that universities are places of diversity pernicious is that acting on it can easily deform the institutional structures, policies, and procedures that support university culture. The more that deans and academic senates take the diversity idea seriously, the less

hospitable their institutions will be to intellectual community. This is because protecting and celebrating diversity for the sake of protecting and celebrating diversity will undercut the freedom and individual judgement and responsibility essential to strenuous interrogation.

Certainly we want all people given to the life of the mind to be welcomed and cherished at universities. Welcoming and cherishing people of diverse backgrounds, abilities, and identities might well require changes and accommodations in the ways we go about things. Those changes and accommodations, though, must always be consistent with the values and goals of the life of the mind. They must not threaten the direction of research, say, or the spirit of free discussion, or the experience of the classroom, or the pedagogical integrity of the course.

Now, stating a criterion by which to judge whether a policy or accommodation can be accepted or must be rejected raises the question who is to judge. The only answer consistent with intellectual community is that all of us are to judge, that is, all of us are invited to express and debate our opinions about policies and cases; but only the professor whose endeavour—in research, teaching, discussion—could be affected can be the effective judge, the one whose judgement, sound or faulty, prevails. We all have a duty to accommodate—that's not in dispute. The question is, what does the duty to accommodate require in this particular circumstance? Only the determination of the professor asked to make an accommodation can properly be honoured by the university. That's not because the professor will be right. It is because the integrity of her teaching is compromised by forcing another's determination upon her.

The professor can get it wrong, and wrong determinations need to be criticised, and criticised publicly. But a university is harmed more by administrators overruling bad determinations regarding accommodation than by professors implementing their bad determinations, at least at least at universities where such matters are publicly discussed.

One might counter that an academic senate can legitimately set policy binding on professors regarding accommodation. This view is false, and not merely because academic senates themselves rarely enjoy legitimacy at their institutions. (A serious problem with many academic senates is that *ex officio* members, academic deans, for instance, are voting members. This source of illegitimacy is compounded when academic administrators sit on hiring committees for academic administrators.)

It's false because academic senates should be safeguarding the rights and privileges of professors with regard to their teaching and their courses. That is central to their mission of maintaining and promoting the academic integrity of their universities.

Canadian universities are not, in any interesting sense, microcosms of our diverse, multicultural Canadian society. The more universities seek to become like the society around them, the less they will be spaces in which we are able to live the life of the mind.