

289. Social justice agenda stuffs Saint Mary's University in intellectual straitjacket

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A university can be a place of intellectual engagement or it can be an agent for social justice. It cannot be both.

With its new Employment Equity, Diversity and Inclusion [Policy](#), Saint Mary's University has decided to be an agent for social justice.

Saint Mary's has been moving away from academics and toward contemporary social justice goals for over a decade, but the EDI policy commits it to them officially. Social justice goals now trump all others and social justice tools will be used to secure them.

At the core of contemporary social justice movements is the idea that our central institutions, if not all our institutions, should reflect the percentages of designated groups in the wider society. The designated groups always include Black people and other racial minorities, Indigenous people, the disabled, and women. They sometimes include lesbians and gays, ethnic minorities, the overweight, and so on.

Thus, if Black people make up 2.5% of Nova Scotia's adult population, 2.5% of doctors, police officers, journalists, politicians and professors in the province should be Black. All central institutions should be at least 50% women. As well, because some specialties within these groups have more status than others, 2.5% of heart surgeons or math professors should be Black.

A university committed to contemporary social justice will be hard pressed to serve its academic mission. It won't seek to hire the best candidate overall but the best candidate from a designated group who exceeds minimum standards. It won't construct courses and curricula to challenge students and encourage them to think for themselves. Instead, courses will confirm and celebrate students' identities. It won't be a place of robust and open critical discussion. The results of its research won't be the fruit of honest and dispassionate inquiry.

Universities function best when people are hired and tenured according to the quality of their research and their teaching alone. Bringing in academically irrelevant criteria such as race or sex demotes merit. If it is true that people from the designated groups add skills and perspectives to the mix, those skills and perspectives will be apparent from their research and teaching. Using race or sex as a proxy is unnecessary and dangerous. (People who are well travelled command our attention because of the quality of their conversation, not because of the stickers on their luggage.)

Academics want to be valued for their insights and abilities. Valuing them for non-academic reasons strikes against their dignity.

The freedom of professors to conduct research as they see fit and to present openly the conclusions they think warranted, however unpopular that research or those conclusions might be, is a defining element of an intellectually robust university. So is the freedom of the professors to teach the material they wish to teach how they wish to teach it. And so is the freedom students and others enjoy to express their views and ideas. But academic freedom and freedom of expression will be restricted by the EDI policy.

The policy states: “Saint Mary’s expects that everyone who works, studies, and visits its campus are treated with dignity and respect. To this end, all employees are required to behave in a welcoming and respectful manner in learning and work environments.”

Once one has parsed the awkward syntax (“everyone are treated,” “everyone who works its campus,” “everyone who studies its campus”), this directive might not seem worrisome. Who could object to welcoming people and treating them with respect?

The trouble is with the word “respect.” “Respect” in this context does not mean respect for individuals as capable of thinking for themselves and as able to evaluate and weigh evidence. It doesn’t mean respect for their ability to choose on the basis of their values. That is, the respect the EDI policy requires is not respect for people’s intellectual and moral autonomy.

It is, rather, respect for their feelings and identities. Where respect for autonomy requires that we be honest and forthcoming with each other, even at the risk of being unpleasant, respect in the EDI policy requires that we dissemble or evade certain topics so as not to hurt people’s feelings. This is “respect” as solicitude.

No doubt oversight and control of inquiry, teaching and discussion will increase, as will the number of complaints about incorrect speech, at least until we learn to self-censor.

But, one might respond, oversight and control is necessary so that students from underrepresented groups will feel welcome and succeed in their studies. Not only does this response belittle students by implying they need to be coddled. It neglects that students are apprentice intellectuals actively looking for controversy.

Will people be able to trust the research that flows from Saint Mary’s? Can you trust research that you suspect must conform to a party line?

Saint Mary’s is not alone in trading open and candid disputation on all subjects for being careful and concerned not to give offence. Most universities in Nova Scotia and Canada have adopted as their mission to celebrate and nurture identities and diversity rather than to inquire into them.

But with so many universities in this province, and, indeed, just in Halifax, there should be room for at least one academic university. We could have a university that hires its faculty according only to merit, supports dispassionate inquiry into the ways of the world, helps students to think for themselves and promotes lively, uninhibited discussion of whatever people want to talk about. I’m sad that Saint Mary’s has chosen not to be that university.

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