

## 299. Shaking One's Fist at Clouds

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It is possible universities will soon rediscover their academic mission, but I'm not betting on it. Most likely, I fear, universities will get even worse before they get better, if they ever do get better. Current structures, ideas and attitudes will have to change drastically if academic values are to return to prominence in universities. But evolutionary reform will take generations and good luck to those fomenting a revolution.

My pessimism raises the question what useful function groups such as the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS) can fulfil. Our letters to university administrators and others appear to have little effect. We argue in favour of academic values in our newsletter and through the events we sponsor, but our agitations seem to be in vain. The National Association of Scholars (NAS) and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) are not enjoying any more success than SAFS is.

What we do in our letters—especially in our letters, but also in the SAFS Newsletter and in the talks we hold—is to try to call university administrators and others in power back to their own best values. A university has made a decision that violates or puts at risk academic freedom, freedom of expression on campus, the merit principle, collegiality, due process or high standards of scholarship, and so we send a letter to the university's president explaining how that decision is contrary to academic values or to the academic mission of the university. If the university's president is committed to academic values, he or she would be moved by our explanation of how the university has gone wrong. Being moved, he or she would do something about it. But rarely is anything put right by a SAFS letter, for rarely is anything put right.

I can think of only one instance in the past decade in which a SAFS letter might have made a positive difference. In October 2016, SAFS sent a letter to the president of Western University criticizing Western's decision to investigate four students for allegedly violating the student code of conduct by (probably inadvertently) trivializing Black Lives Matter (BLM). SAFS argued that the students, even supposing they had made light of BLM, clearly had not violated anything in the code and that, moreover, investigating them would chill discussion on campus. Western soon dropped the matter, finding that the incident “did not rise to the threshold as a code violation under our student code.” Now, Western could certainly have made this determination on its own, without a letter from SAFS. But our letter might have helped. (In any case, Western had done all it needed to do to intimidate students and professors away from criticizing BLM. The finding in favour of the students was on the grounds that they had not demeaned BLM *enough* to warrant discipline.)

If our letter did contribute to the outcome of this case, it did so by reminding a university administrator of his commitment to academic values. In the heat of the moment, an administrator can lose site of the purpose of his institution and his role within it. Yet, it need take only a polite few words to help him to see the larger picture and to appreciate what is at stake. An administrator

conscious of the tension between two values or purposes he seeks to serve might, of course, decide against academic values or purposes, if he judges the other side weightier, though most often he wouldn't judge the other side weightier.

In the years since that letter to Western, SAFS has sent many letters about other egregious threats to and violations of academic values. The outcomes in these cases have not once been favourable to academic values.

That our letters and other interventions are ineffective would seem to indicate that the values we espouse are not values held by people of power at universities. The anti-academic decisions administrators regularly make evince disdain toward academic values. SAFS argues for its positions on principles opaque or contemptible to the university administrators to whom we write letters.

One might suppose the Lindsay Shepherd case is an exception, more like the Western students than like the Jean Laberge, Paul Bali, Mark Hecht, Kathleen Lowry, Tomáš Hudlický or Nikolay Stanchulov case (to take some at random; there are many others). Wilfrid Laurier University, after all, found that Ms Shepherd had done nothing wrong and that the meeting in which she was berated for insensitivity (or worse) should never have taken place. But the upshot of the affair was that WLU urged instructors to keep their teaching assistants on a short leash, to make sure nothing like what Ms Shepherd had done happens again. That at WLU, teaching assistants went from being junior collaborators to orderlies was not a victory for academic values.

The task of SAFS (and the NAS, FIRE and others) cannot be to call universities back to academic values or to their academic mission, for those values and that mission are not held in esteem by university administrators. They are not held in esteem, that is, at those universities prepared to organize themselves without care for these values, which, given the prevalence of diversity, inclusion and equity offices and initiatives at Canadian universities, appears to be many of them.

Would SAFS do better, then, to act politically, to turn to politicians and to try to find ways of changing universities through government policies and actions? Would SAFS do better to seek legal remedies, to try to reform universities by taking them to law? I would not oppose on principle initiatives by SAFS to sway politicians or to initiate or assist in legal proceedings. But I think we need to keep in mind that governments and courts do not understand universities very well and won't do the right thing for the right reason, even should they do the right thing. We must also realize that the best way to galvanize academics who oppose our work is to enlist politicians or governments in our cause. In the end, the costs and penalties of working on universities through politics or law might outweigh the benefits. (This is not to say that SAFS shouldn't help individuals who go to law or that SAFS shouldn't communicate its positions to politicians.)

Universities have moved away from inquiry and disputation and toward celebrating identities and venerating certain social goals and movements. The change is one of culture, from academic culture to social-service culture. It is a change that is being anchored deeply in the institutions, with the rise of offices of oversight and control of teaching and research, loyalty oaths for new professors and formal and informal mechanisms for maintaining the preferred order.

Again, then, how might SAFS be useful in face of the depth and breadth of the cultural change through which we are living? My answer is that we are useful because we keep alive the vision of the academic university. Our task is to articulate, explain and defend academic values and the sorts of institutions and policies that support these values. We need to describe what a university of free inquiry and discussion looks like. We can begin with the concept of intellectual and moral autonomy, that is, the ability to think for oneself and to choose or affirm one's values for oneself. When people who prize intellectual and moral autonomy come together to theorize, interpret and study, they will engage each other collegially and seek to help students to become intellectually and morally autonomous themselves, as well as skilled and knowledgeable.

Keeping the vision alive will serve future generations well, should the general culture change enough to enable academic universities to emerge and thrive. Unless an articulate account of university culture is available in years hence, people will lack good models to stimulate their thoughts and guide their efforts.

We will want to keep the vision of an academic university alive in practice, of course, as well as alive as an ideal. To do that, we have to remain true to the vision by creating small communities within our larger universities. We will want, as far as possible without jeopardizing our employment, to conduct ourselves as academics, not only because it is our pleasure to do so but also for the future. Recreating a way of life is difficult when no one at all is living that way of life. We'll want to hand it down directly, not only through writing, however we might manage to do that.

SAFS should continue to write letters to universities, taking issue with decisions that violate or put at risk academic freedom, freedom of expression on campus, the merit principle, collegiality, due process or high standards of scholarship. For all we know, one of them might make a difference in the specific case that called it forth. But we should not be concerned that the decisions we criticize cogently on academic grounds will nonetheless stand, though I hope we never lose our ability to be appalled. Our attempts to bring about change through arguing from academic principles is part of our attempt to articulate and communicate a vision of the academic university, a vision to which we are committed.