

Why is academic freedom prolonging the Ontario college strike?

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This morning, I had the opportunity to talk with CBC radio morning shows about academic freedom: what is it and why is it important to professors. And most importantly, why is it so important that it's at the centre of a 4-week strike that has no end in sight?

Academic Freedom has been contorted by many forces: in popular terms, by sensationalist reporting that focuses on individual instances of a professor doing something bad but being protected from reprisal. But it's not really that.

Academic Freedom is the heart of a higher education institute's academic programming. At the individual level, a professor with academic freedom has the ability to design a course how they want. They can choose to use slides, they can choose to use a blackboard. They can decide to change their teaching strategies mid-semester to meet the needs of students. They can build on lectures that they have thoroughly practiced. They can integrate their research into the classroom. They are in control of what they teach.

Of course, they still have to comply with ministry learning outcomes or external accreditation requirements of their program; these systems are not opposed to one another. University programs aren't immune from this: engineering is highly regulated by external bodies and still, engineering professors have academic freedom.

Without academic freedom, a professor has little to no guarantee that colleges won't overstep their boundaries. OPSEU's college division warns that without academic freedom, professors can be forced to use a certain textbook, have the grades that they've given students changed, forced to disseminate their intellectual property online, face sanctions for what they teach in class with no reasonable recourse to protest and worse, give their teaching notes over to someone else to teach the same class. Aside from being generally stressful, a professor risks not having any protection over their life's work.

Academic freedom is necessary for any institution that wants to have a credible research program.

Without academic freedom provisions in a collective agreement, professors are at the whim of benevolent college administrators. That may be fine when administrators are great managers, but it leaves professors open to a lot of risk.

At its heart, this is a debate over who should have the most say in how education is delivered. The university model demonstrates that experts in a field of study should be the ones who make academic decisions. Of course and importantly, alongside the students that they teach. College administrators are not usually academic experts, and are certainly not experts in every field. Leaving decisions to them can mean that academic programming is decided by someone who knows nothing at all about the field, or whose interests are in opposition to the professors and the students. A decision that might be in the financial interest of management could easily be in opposition to a higher quality education.

How would these issues be managed or mitigated? Ontarians don't need to look further than the closest university for the answer. Universities protect academic freedom. If a student challenges a mark, they go through a process that was designed and administered by professors. If there's a conflict with a professor and what they say in the classroom, you simply need to build structures to adjudicate. Departmental councils determine curriculum and academic programming, senates bring these together at the institutional level.

And most importantly, university professors have the academic freedom necessary to do their research. Far from only being there to protect the fringe professors, academic freedom guarantees that, as long as their research

meets certain ethical guidelines, they can engage in it. They're given the "freedom" to know that a long-term study is possible because they'll be able to do it long-term, for example.

The question I got most this morning that I found difficult to answer was: why are the colleges so opposed to giving professors academic freedom, and really, it's hard to reply without being cynical about it. No one likes losing control, certainly not when it will create structures that you will have to engage with to arrive at a satisfying solution. It will make managing more difficult, in that the colleges can't simply impose their ideas or direction.

It's unacceptable that this has kept picket lines in tact, and students at home. It exposes the college administrations for trying to play both sides of the academic game. Either: they don't offer applied degrees or they do. Either they don't offer research opportunities or they do. Either they don't co-deliver university degrees or they do. If the colleges want to do these things, they must embrace academic freedom. Otherwise, they're lying to students and the communities they serve about the quality of the education they're offering.

There is a lot to be proud about Ontario's college system. The colleges are attracting highly credentialed faculty who are excited by teaching and by their fields. The way in which the college's bargaining team is treating academic freedom is shameful. When a no-cost, reasonable demand is put forward by your workers, the smart thing to do is to take it. Dragging the strike out any longer is unfair to students and professors. And worse, dragging it out because you oppose the one thing that makes higher education higher education, well, maybe it's time for the College Employers Council to go back to school.