

Campus culture wars: Universities need to rediscover the radical middle ground

 thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2017/11/21/campus-culture-wars-universities-need-to-rediscover-the-radical-middle-ground.html

11/20/2017

By Paul Axelrod

Tues., Nov. 21, 2017

Academic freedom controversies continue to bedevil universities, highlighted most recently by the stunning episode at Wilfrid Laurier University. That a teaching assistant in a communications program would be reprimanded for showing video clips of a debate on the use of gender-neutral language is almost incomprehensible.

Academic freedom is not absolute, and there are some reasonable constraints that govern its application. But none have been offered that justify Wilfrid Laurier's rebuke of the teaching assistant. She appeared to have been encouraging debate and civil discourse on a topic about which people disagree. That, indeed, is a key function of academic freedom, and of the university itself.

In what ways, then, can free expression in universities be reasonably constrained? There are several.

Fraudulent research by professors and students are grounds for dismissal in the case of the former and severe academic penalty in the case of the latter.

Professors are not entitled to publish anything they write in academic journals. They are subject to peer review, and editors can require them to revise manuscripts; those submissions perceived to fall short will be rejected

Academics can be made to teach certain courses, and prevented from teaching others, in the interest of meeting student demand and program coherence.

While academics and students are entitled to publicly criticize their administrations (is there a single nonuniversity organization that would allow this?), deans, vice presidents, and other senior administrators, who may also be academics, do not have that freedom.

In the classroom, university teachers must lecture competently; they do not have a license to use their podiums in order to propagandize, speak in habitually ill-informed ways, or lie. Free speech allows citizens to do this on street corners or blogs, but universities have loftier goals. Academic freedom and freedom of speech are not the same thing; they are different forms of expression, both vital, in a democratic society.

Can the university, legitimately, restrict the use of certain language, or otherwise govern the interactions of its members?

In the past, professors who demeaned women, spoke or behaved in racist ways (the history of sexism and anti-Semitism on Canadian campuses is well documented), or degraded and demeaned students, had free rein. They were not accountable for their words and actions.

This, rightly, is no longer the case. In the wake of movements for human and minority rights, universities are now committed to treating their members equitably and with dignity. Codes of professional behaviour have evolved, and university teachers may not use sexist or racist language, nor can they humiliate students.

Professors can vigorously challenge students' ideas and criticize their academic work, but this should be done

respectfully and professionally. Regulations and guidelines which uphold such standards, in my view, are entirely justified.

Another restraint can be found in Canada's criminal code. Speech that promotes "genocide" and "incites hatred against any identifiable group where such incitement is likely to lead to a breach of the peace" is illegal, on and off university campuses. The law, presumably, could deny a university platform to white supremacists, like those who marched and chanted racist and anti-Semitic slogans at Charlottesville earlier this year. (The U.S. has no such hate law).

Neo-fascists who speak in code, avoiding overt hate mongering, could be exposed and denounced by critics, but if their words break no law, forcefully silencing them sets a perilous precedent that could be used to curtail vexatious presentations by those with different political views.

Some argue that such regulations of speech and language are insufficient — a stance that has led to major flare-ups on American and Canadian campuses, including the Wilfrid Laurier episode.

Certain activists on the left seek to prohibit any form of expression that might offend identifiable groups. Thus controversial conservatives such as Ann Coulter, Charles Murray and Jordan Peterson have been interrupted or disinvited from campuses rather than being debated or intellectually confronted.

Through U.S. publications, such as Campus Reform and Professor Watchlist, militants on the right have declared intellectual and political war on leftists, postmodernists, and other reviled equity warriors. Such surveillance and attempted political shaming have encouraged some extremists to threaten the lives of targeted faculty.

These equally illiberal campaigns, rife with dogmatism and intolerance, threaten to paralyze universities and erode their academic *raison d'être* which must be rediscovered and reaffirmed by administrators, faculty and students.

The fundamental purpose of academic freedom is to facilitate the widest possible scope for expression by professors and students. The university's commitment to equity and cultural diversity can affect, to some degree, the conduct of university relationships, including the use of language.

Prohibitions on racism, sexism and harassment are legitimate and necessary. But behavioural regulations can be too wide-ranging, ineptly applied, or taken to extreme by zealous advocates who seek to silence rather than intellectually engage their adversaries.

In such a polarized age, universities and colleges should uphold the core values of liberal education by asserting, through their policies and practices, the reasonable, rational, and arguably, the radical middle ground. The future of our institutions, and possibly, of civil society itself, requires it.

Paul Axelrod is a retired professor and former dean of education at York University. He is author or editor of several books on the history of schooling and higher education, including *Making Policy in Turbulent Times: Challenges and Prospects for Post-secondary Education*.