Visionary Conversation, Wednesday, September 17, 2014
St. John's College, University of Manitoba
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Free Expression – Who Pays the Price?
Academic Freedom

What is academic freedom and why is it important?

The scientist Galileo recanting his commitment to the Copernican theory, viz., that the earth revolves around the sun rather than vice versa, demonstrates what academic freedom is intended to prevent. Academic freedom allows scholars to pursue the truth where it takes them, whether in support of – or as a corrective to – current orthodoxies, and to proclaim that truth.

It is a critical underpinning of university research and teaching.

With rights come responsibilities. Accordingly, academic freedom is also important to the larger community because it gives assurance that academics in all areas of expertise are *expected* to challenge what we think we know and to push the boundaries of what is known. Governments, churches, university administrations, donors – none of these should be allowed to control the development and dissemination of knowledge – even if it makes them uncomfortable.

Academic freedom is often thought to be enabled, in part, by granting permanent employment – or tenure – to faculty members so that controversial ideas cannot lead to recrimination in the form of terminated employment.

Academic freedom is a valuable principle and we should all – academics and members of the general population – defend it.

If it is so valuable, why is there sometimes controversy surrounding it?

Recently a dean at the University of Saskatchewan was terminated from both his administrative term position as dean and his tenured academic position, reportedly for publicly criticizing administrative decisions. He was soon restored to his tenured academic position, and senior leaders left the University over the controversy. Restoring tenure seems clearly appropriate. But was termination of the administrative position a violation of academic freedom? Some say yes, that academic freedom allows deans to criticize decisions, even those they must help implement. Others disagree, saying that no organization can function if those who must implement decisions – taken using the organization's established mechanisms – fight against them, universities included. As another example, suppose I were to claim academic freedom and teach UM's first course in my discipline of computer science using a different approach – in my view, a better one – than is specified in my department's established course description. Would that independent decision be an example of academic freedom – or disrespectful of students who would be unprepared for later courses?

Within the last couple of weeks several university presidents have urged that academic debates be conducted with civility. Some faculty members see this as a potential assault on academic freedom, as a way for administrators potentially to suppress the expression of things they do not want said – some have even opined that individuals could be "bullied" into silence. Perhaps. But it is also quite possible

that those promoting civility sincerely believe that a civil environment actually *contributes to* academic freedom. This is because bullying can also occur when those who are willing to behave disrespectfully intimidate colleagues who find such behavior unacceptable. Or bullying can occur when senior colleagues who will be involved in the promotion and tenure considerations of junior colleagues coerce support for their own positions in department or faculty decisions. These things happen, are difficult to deal with and are known to university leaders, including presidents. As a result, for many leaders the emphasis on civility seems important at the present moment. I wonder what your own experience might be of the impact of incivility where you work?

The recent focus on civility, by the way, is also criticized by some as a lesser issue than – and perhaps an intentional distraction from – problems like racism and systemic discrimination. In UM's case, I am pleased that this Visionary Conversation series focused on racism more than a year ago and we are only coming to this subject now. I am also pleased that about three years ago as a University we made a statement of apology for our complacency during the Indian residential school era. In fact, apropos my topic tonight, that apology can be seen as an admission that we did not sufficiently exercise our responsibility to use our academic freedom: as an academic community we should have examined what was happening more carefully and spoken out at the time.

Many people support protecting the unhindered quest for truth in universities. Public support for academic freedom could, though, be weakened. Canadians have many rights, and Canadian academics have this additional right. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in its first article states that there can be "reasonable limits prescribed by law" to the exercise of rights. The Ontario Human Rights Commission has an official policy on balancing rights in which the first consideration is that "No rights are absolute." Perhaps the greatest threat to academic freedom is not in applying it carefully and thoughtfully, but in the tendency to enlarge it so that it appears to trump all other rights. This would be protecting privilege without responsibility.

I look forward to hearing your views on these matters, and to a lively conversation.