

On free speech, our universities get an 'F'

Freedom of expression on campus is sometimes portrayed as a right-wing cause. But U.S. President Barack Obama recently declared: "I don't agree that you, when you become students at colleges, have to be coddled and protected from different points of view.... Anybody who comes to speak to you, and you disagree with, you should have an argument with 'em. But you shouldn't silence them by saying, 'You can't come because I'm too sensitive to hear what you have to say.' That's not the way we learn either."

The president offers sage advice to both American and Canadian universities, in the face of a trend to rid campuses of views and ideas that some might find "offensive," "hurtful," "disrespectful" or even "disingenuous." "Trigger warnings," "micro-aggressions" and "safe space" have entered campus parlance as ways to silence discussion and restrict events that might "trigger" someone into feeling uncomfortable or insecure.

This trend threatens the ability of universities to foster an environment that facilitates intellectual discovery and social progress, noble pursuits that generally end up offending someone's sensibilities. Copernicus, for example, deeply offended members of the intellectual and scientific order of the day he (and others) declared that the Earth was not the centre of the universe. The pursuit of truth inevitably causes offence, often to the majority. But the discovery process makes us all better and more informed citizens in the end.

Universities are legally required to uphold the rule of law, including both the safety and free expression rights of their students, faculty and invited guests on university property. But many universities condone mob

and then use "security fees" to silence the expression and debate of controversial and unpopular ideas on campus, by pricing such expression out of existence.

The fifth annual *Campus Freedom Index* sheds light on these issues by grading universities and student unions (using standard grade letters) on how well their policies and practices support free speech. Using specific, measurable and replicable criteria, this index provides university administrators and student union executives with clear standards they can adopt.

The 2015 findings are not good. With 220 grades awarded to 55 campuses (for university policies, university practices, student union policies and student union practices), Canada's universities and student unions received only eight "A" grades, compared to 41 "F" grades.

Concordia University approved and facilitated the removal of several texts from the Reflections Library operated by the Muslim Students Association in March 2015, after media reported that some of the books in the library were written by authors who had made controversial statements in the past. The university also failed to oppose the cancellation of a lecture near campus by Canadian MP Marc Garneau, citing fear of violent protest.

The University of Alberta condoned the bullying, censorship and intimidation of the group UAlberta Pro-Life, throughout the 2014-15 school year. The U of A failed to take action against numerous violations of the *Code of Student Behaviour*, including the vandalism and destruction of students' posters; incitement

to inappropriate behaviour and to criminal behaviour; and the obstruction and disruption of a university-related activity, namely the student club's peaceful, educational display on campus.

Some universities are standing up against this trend to silence discourse in the name of preventing discomfort. In September 2014, Memorial University defended free expression against pressure from some students and faculty to condemn a lecture series on post-abortion mental health services, sponsored by the Counselling Centre and the Campus Chaplaincy. In February 2015, the University of Toronto defended free expression in relation to a lecture titled "WWI 100th Anniversary: Human Suffering in Eastern Anatolia." Amidst protest and demands to shut the event down, the university ensured there was an adequate security presence.

If universities continue to follow this trend of coddling young minds in an effort to protect students from what makes them feel uncomfortable, not only do they risk stifling intellectual and social progress, but they will leave these students ill-prepared to properly deal with the reality of discomfort in their working and adult lives.

To the students, parents and other taxpayers who pay billions of dollars to universities each year, this should be deeply offensive.

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