

NATIONAL POST

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2016

www.nationalpost.com

At the University of Alberta, it is literally too expensive to try to share a controversial opinion

As intolerance to unpopular opinions has grown on Canadian campuses, university administrations have been forced into innovative strategies to keep the peace while avoiding accusations of stifling free speech.

In the not-too-distant past, officials seeking to placate campus groups opposed to controversial speakers or events could use the threat of trespass laws — as happened at the University of Calgary in 2009 when a pro-life group sought to erect a display on campus — or issue a clumsy warning about the limits of free speech — as University of Ottawa provost Francois Houle delivered before a planned visit by American polemicist Ann Coulter in 2010.

But the ongoing — if perverse — determination to kowtow to the narrow dogmatism of campus activists has evidently pushed academics and other members of Canada's university administrations into seeking creative new ways to mollify demands for “safe spaces” on campus and protection from exposure to views that may diverge from the latest interpretations of political acceptability. Universities, once considered proponents of learning, now seem to see it as their duty to protect students from exposure to views that may violate prevailing doctrines.

The solution? The University of Alberta recently hit on a relatively novel idea. When the group UAlberta Pro-Life sought to set up an exhibit that would include displays showing graphic pictures

of aborted fetuses — almost certainly offending pro-choice students or faculty — the university notified the group it would be charged a fee of \$17,500 to cover the cost of security.

The group says it was informed of the charge just 11 days before the event, which the president of the club said the group couldn't possibly afford. “Not only is \$17,500 a very large number for students, but the university would have wanted a \$9,000 deposit by last Friday,” said UAlberta Pro-Life's Amberlee Nicol. “We just don't have that kind of money.” As a result, the group had to cancel its event.

It can't be considered anything but bizarre that the potential targets of disruption would be charged for their protection, rather than those representing the disruption. If a similar approach was taken by society at large, any group wanting to stage a public protest would receive a bill for the resultant policing budget. Should a pro-choice group wish to erect a display, and UAlberta Pro-Life members arrived to trash it, would the university hold the victims to account in a similar manner?

It is surely no coincidence that the University of Alberta chose to direct its demand towards a group with a message contrary to prevailing campus dogma. Similar requests have been made of men's groups planning events on campus in the past, though the price tags for

security in those cases were dramatically less: \$964 for a University of Toronto group to host a 2013 lecture and \$1,600 for the Men's Issues Awareness Society at Ryerson University in 2014, though that fee was later withdrawn.

Wendy Rodgers, deputy provost at the U of A, said all groups go through the same consideration process when they apply to host an event on campus. She said the university is “willing to work” with the group to help lessen the financial burden, perhaps by moving to event to a location where fewer police officers or security guards would be necessary. Of course, moving the exhibit to a remote corner of the campus would also serve to reduce the group's visibility and its ability to share its ideas.

It sends entirely the wrong message for universities to put the financial burden of security on organizations seeking only to share their views in a peaceable and civilized manner. If activist groups can't tolerate the freedom of others to hold contrary opinions without threatening disruption, surely they are the ones to which the security apparatus should be devoting its attention. Attitudes like those prevailing at the University of Alberta make it literally too expensive to have a controversial opinion.

--Robyn Urback