The nature and value of academic freedom

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Professors at Saint Mary's and most other institutions of higher learning enjoy a wide degree of freedom in teaching and research. What we teach, how we teach it, what we research, how we research it, and what we conclude from our research is to a large extent up to us as individual professors. Professors also enjoy a wide degree of freedom to speak publicly about their own teaching and research and about the teaching and research of their colleagues. In addition, professors are free to make known their views on politics and society. And they are free to criticize their universities.

This bag of freedoms goes by the name "academic freedom." Professors who possess academic freedom may, within the contracts under which they hold their positions, teach, research, and say what they would like without fearing that their choices could get them fired, disciplined, or otherwise penalized by their university.

Academic freedom—what it is and why it is important—is not well understood, certainly not outside universities, but not always by members of university communities, either. That it is not well understood is troubling, for to fail to understand and appreciate academic freedom is to fail to understand and appreciate universities generally. Moreover, though it is true that right now academic freedom is well protected by collective agreements and professional associations, failures to understand it threaten to erode that protection and, thereby, to put the mission of universities at risk.

Most people recognize that academic freedom is an aid to teaching, research, and the dissemination of research. New ideas and novel theories are sometimes disturbing or unwelcome; thus, if the universities' mission includes creating and disseminating ideas and theories, that mission is well served by protecting the researcher from forces that would prevent new ideas from coming to light or would suppress those that do. A parallel argument can be made concerning new ways of teaching.

These arguments are sound as far as they go, but they don't go terribly far. For one, soon enough, the new becomes old. If it hasn't in the process come to be accepted by the relevant specialists, the above argument gives no reason to continue to protect it, especially if it's obnoxious. (Think, for instance, of the theory that members of one race are innately more lascivious than members of another.) For another, it doesn't cover speaking publicly or criticizing the university.

We should note here that much novel science and social theory got produced and then managed to win acceptance without the help of academic freedom. Few academic scientists from the time of the scientific revolution to, say, fifty years ago, enjoyed the

protections contemporary academic scientists enjoy, and yet science flourished in the academy. (That it would have blossomed brighter and sooner had things been different is something else we should note, though.) Even today, more than a few institutions of higher learning restrict academic freedom in their communities. Some religious universities, for instance, prohibit professors from voicing doubts about the faith. These universities nonetheless manage to contribute to the growth of knowledge.

The deeper argument for academic freedom is that this freedom is necessary to a certain sort of life. A university community cannot be a community of intellectuals and scholars unless its members are free from institutional pressures to conform to given norms, even the norms current in their disciplines. This is because central to this life is the commitment to be moved only by argument and example, and to attempt to move others only by argument and example. Even social pressures, let alone the threat of losing one's livelihood, are inconsistent with this commitment and can undermine it. Academic freedom, then, both expresses the honesty, candour, and openness central to the life of the mind and serves the university community by relieving people of the need to have the courage to put one's job on the line to participate unreservedly in that life.

This, I think, is the real explanation why we should value academic freedom. Academic freedom enables us to live as intellectuals in respectful community with other intellectuals. (It's necessary for this. I hasten to add that it isn't sufficient.) Take it away, and ties of respect and collegiality are broken, and the prerogative of rules and authority is extended. Take it away, and one lives as an intellectual either at the pleasure of authority or else furtively. A university without academic freedom might have its own virtues, but it wouldn't be a community of intellectuals.

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