Moderator's introduction to the panel discussion "Academic Freedom for Students: How Free Should the Students Be?"

4 pm, Thursday 25 January 2018
Sobey Theatre
Saint Mary's University
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyNp9P-iu8Y&t=12s

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Good afternoon and welcome. I'm Mark Mercer. I teach in the philosophy department here at Saint Mary's and I will moderate today's discussion on Academic Freedom for Students: How Free Should the Students Be?

The panelists are Russell Currie, Marc Heller, Ossama Nasrallah, and Lindsay Shepherd. Russell is a fourth-year philosophy Honours student at Saint Mary's, just about to finish his program. Marc has a Bachelors and a Masters in philosophy, both from Saint Mary's. He successfully defended his Master's thesis, on liberal education, in August 2016. Ossama Nasrallah is a fourth-year marketing student in the Sobey School of Business. He is also currently president of the Saint Mary's University Students' Association. Lindsay Shepherd has a BA in Communication from Simon Fraser University and she's now a Masters student in Cultural Analysis and Social Theory at Wilfrid Laurier University.

We have three university students and a recent university graduate to speak to students and others about a matter that concerns students in their role as students.

The panelists will speak in the order in which I've introduced them. Each will have eight minutes to state a position regarding our question how free should the students be. I'll keep time and I'll signal when there is one minute remaining. Each panelist will then have two minutes to respond to what others have said. After that, the panelists will take questions from members of the audience.

I'd like to thank the two sponsors of our discussion, Saint Mary's University and the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship. The Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship is an organization of mainly Canadian academics founded in 1992. Its mission is to maintain freedom in teaching, research, and scholarship and to maintain high standards of excellence in academic decision making concerning both students and faculty.

I'd like particularly to thank Malcolm Butler, Vice President Academic and Research, for generously providing the wine and cheese reception. Right after the session here, do come join us all in the lounge on the fourth-floor of the Sobey building for food and drinks, and to continue the conversation with our panelists.

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Our topic is broad and ill defined. Each panelist will, of course, narrow it down to the one or two matters that concerns him or her most. But let me try to articulate the most general issue.

Freedom contrasts with constraint—the constraints of rules and policies backed up by sanctions and punishments, of course, but also the informal constraints of people's attitudes and their practices of praise and blame.

Now a student's life involves classrooms and essays, of course, but it involves much more. It involves formal and informal interactions with professors and other students, events both academic and social, art and music, campus newspapers and campus radio, the library, the cafeteria, clubs and societies, the hallways, the quad. I suppose the dorms fall on the side of home life, and so are outside our discussion, but I'd be easy to persuade that they, too, count as places were students are still students.

With each of these activities and in each of these places come rules and other constraints. The Academic Calendar contains both academic regulations and a student code of conduct, the students' association oversees student societies and student media, and vets postings on university walls. University officials monitor social media to see what students are saying about their professors and classmates and how they are saying it. Professors keep an eye on their teaching assistants.

Those who favour minimal rules and oversight in one or another area of student life and endeavor say that rules and oversight get in the way of self-expression and self-determination—and, moreover, tend to slow down the development in students of intellectual and moral autonomy. An intellectually and morally autonomous individual is one who believes and values for her own good reasons, and not, that is, out of fear of punishment or hope of reward. If a university is to be a place at which students may develop into intellectually and morally autonomous people, and exercise daily whatever moral and intellectual autonomy they possess, then a university must be a place of freedom for students, even if students will sometimes use their freedom poorly.

Freedom from constraint does not, of course, mean freedom from criticism. Those who say false or pernicious things or say what they say in a rough way can be criticized for doing so and shown better ways. In a place of freedom, when people reform their views or manners, they do so because they accept reasons for doing so, not because they must or else.

Those, on the other hand, who favour strong rules and effective oversight worry about the effects on others of what students say and do. Certain views, even certain discussions, can belittle, disturb, and even scare some students (and professors). That is, the presence of these views in the air or on the walls can move students out of the frame of mind in which they can do their best work. Students will not feel at home, or as if the university is theirs, when these ideas and feelings are bandied about, especially if they are discussed dispassionately, academically. Freedom for students, then, has academic and personal costs for many students.

That's one of the worries. Another is that ideas and attitudes harmful to people will spread if those ideas and attitudes are allowed free expression and can be matters of dispassionate investigation and discussion. That a noxious idea has been refuted is no guarantee that it will go away, and its persistence threatens to infect others, others who will act on it. (We see this worry most clearly in play in the desire of organized pro-choice groups to prevent public discussion of abortion, even when pro-choice defenders are among the discussants.)

On the one side, then, we have people who see the university as a place for intellectuals to do what intellectuals do—to engage in investigation, interpretation, and discussion freely and for its own sake. On the other side are those who, while they might not despise intellectual life, are vividly aware of the dangers it creates and who would, then, restrict it to serve other goals.

An intellectual's university is a place of disputation, where everything, including people's identities, is up for grabs. But, say others, some people's identities, at least at this time and in this place, should be celebrated, not discussed critically. As well, they say, all university students are entitled to pursue a university education undistractedly and in their best frame of mind. (Only then, they might add, will people from historically marginalized groups be able to take places in the professional and elite world in anything near the proper proportion.) Finally, some matters are too important for even academics to take them academically.

Can the two sides find enough common ground to come to a resolution? Those who favour an academic university have argued that the situation for students supposedly at risk is very far from dire, that the worries are exaggerated. There are, that is, some empirical matters to address. But it seems to me that even if university students from marginalized groups would not be at much risk in free universities and even if our society has little to worry about from the effects of dispassionate inquiry into significant issues, the fundamental conception of the nature and purpose of higher education differs between the two so greatly that no compromise is possible. A university must be either a place for intellectuals (and aspiring intellectuals) to engage in the life of the mind or be a place of codes and rules and oversight, and shaming and rewarding, in service to inculcating in students and promoting in the wider culture a particular set of attitudes and values; it cannot be a bit of each. As soon as its rules address the content of what people might say or try to enforce civility, a university ceases to be a place of intellectual autonomy.

If I'm right about that, then perhaps the best solution is separation. Some universities could be academic universities, places in which intellectuals gather to inquiry dispassionately into the things that interest them, and, thus, where students enjoy maximum freedom, while other universities could be places where identities and feelings are protected and celebrated. Each would advertise what it is all about and students (and professors) could choose.

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Now let us hear from our panelists. Russell?

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