

321. In Praise of Institutional Neutrality

University Affairs, July 27, 2026

Under the title “Institutional neutrality: the case in favour”

<https://universityaffairs.ca/opinion/institutional-neutrality-the-case-in-favour/>

Mark Mercer

sergechestnut@gmail.com

By announcing an opinion on a matter of the day, a university might cause professors and students to avoid discussing a topic or to speak insincerely or guardedly about it. As well, by announcing an opinion on a matter of the day, a university tacitly directs that truth can be commanded by authority. Finally, academic life is open, free, unhurried, critical, unsettled, tentative and exploratory; official pronouncements, on the other hand, are constructed by committees and ratified by votes, and then issued on the authority of an administrative unit.

I’ve described three excellent reasons why a university should not take sides or pronounce on matters of controversy — or, indeed, on any matters at all. Each of these reasons is well known to all who have studied the principle of institutional neutrality. And yet, university officers in Canada have not been shy to issue official university statements on matters roiling their campuses.

Most universities in Canada require that land acknowledgements be spoken at various gatherings and more than a few have endorsed the [Scarborough Charter](#) on anti-Black racism. Many universities or university departments have issued official statements on such matters as Gaza, anti-Semitism, immigration, diversity, the Holodomor, human remains in museums, and anti-Asian racism. No university committed to institutional neutrality would have done so.

Why are universities willing to violate the principle of institutional neutrality, a principle that safeguards free and open discussion and expresses commitments to independent truth, the individual thinker and continuing inquiry? My explanation is that university officials prefer various non-academic ends and values to academic ones. The institution should serve its academic purpose as well as it can, those willing to see universities violate institutional neutrality might allow, but the institution should compromise that purpose when the institution could serve other purposes. Reconciliation, anti-racism, the emotional safety of students, peace and justice—these are but a few purposes a university might serve better were it not always neutral, and surely these causes are more urgent and more important than providing for open and free inquiry.

One might ask just how well official pronouncements by universities do protect or promote valuable things. Do they do more than please those who make them and signal their virtue? Surely no number of statements by universities is going to contribute anything to a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. It is, on the other hand, conceivable that university research might.

Note also that research and opinions that emanate from universities committed to free and unfettered critical inquiry are more likely to be trustworthy. Consider, though, how trustworthy is

research into the condition of Indigenous people in Canada that comes from a university publicly hostile to skepticism that there are bodies of children buried in a residential school's orchard.

Although it is no part of an academic university's remit to be socially useful, it might well be that the most socially useful universities are the ones most strongly committed to their academic ethos.

Well, say critics of institutional neutrality, at least university statements about respect for all people, their ways of life and their ways of knowing can assure minority professors and students that they are valued. That might well be true, even as we should be concerned that a person's self-image depends on an administrator's approval. A student, though, might, in the course of their studies (or in the cafeteria), hear or read a view they despise. If they formally complain (rather than simply object), the official pronouncement is now a weapon. Whatever the university offers this student, it isn't a university education, for the university does not see the student as capable of thinking and responding for themselves, as an academic would.

Critics of institutional neutrality make the sound point that to take a neutral stance is not to be politically neutral. The commitment to neutrality rests on a set of values and a vision of human social and personal relations.

An essential aspect of liberalism is a strong civil society, comprised of various institutions that house and protect all sorts of practices. Sports clubs, social clubs, orchestras, parks, publishing houses, small businesses, trade unions, theatres and paths along the riverbank are only a few of the institutions that go to make up a civil society. Universities, of course, are among these institutions. A liberal society is one in which institutions of civil society are left more or less alone by government and industry so that they might serve the specific practices they house.

In an illiberal society, governments or other powerful agents seek to implant their own purposes within the institutions of civil society, so that the latter will contribute to and promote what these overseers wish them to. In this way, the particularity of the institution and the practice it houses is transformed into just another iteration of a common way of life. Liberals, then, will try to maintain the integrity of institutions of civil society, so that they are not emptied of their specific identity.

While there are things more important than chess, there can be nothing more important within a chess club than the practice of chess, or else the club is only accidentally about chess. If the chess club, the swimming pool and the arts centre all lose their specific integrity, and become the same thing under different colours—partners in the fight for racial justice, say—then civil society is lost.

Those who value thinking hard about difficult matters, and doing so in community with others, will want their institution to remain neutral on issues of the day, for they will want their institution to express, protect and nurture the academic life. That is their sufficient motivation to try to keep their institution neutral. In response to the charge that there are things more important than the academic life, I would say, yes, there are. One of them is a healthy and vibrant civil society.