

Introduction to University: Lecture Six

A First Look at Students

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Let's talk about students today. I'm going to use the term "students' rights," but by *rights* I don't mean human rights, civil rights or legal rights. "Rights" is just a quick way of specifying what a student can properly expect to be granted him or to be available to him.

The rights a student has as a student will flow from the academic mission of the university and those values and practices necessary or useful to that mission. The mission is to be a place at which people who value intellectual and moral autonomy may gather to think hard about difficult matters.

For a student, then the **rights** he or she has, or should have, at a university are embodied in just those procedures, institutions and freedoms necessary or useful for 1) acquiring the skills and understandings of an intellectual and 2) living as an (aspiring) intellectual within a community of intellectuals.

As rights, students' rights are—or, at least, they should be—backed up by safeguards and procedures set by the university. Safeguards include the university's concern that members of the university community know the rights that students have and why they have these rights. Procedures include those by which students may complain when they believe their rights have been violated or are under threat, those by which complaints are heard and fairly evaluated, and those by which complaints with merit find their remedy.

Rights, we're often told, come with responsibilities. It's not clear that that's true, at least if the thought is that a person who uses a right irresponsibly may with justice be deprived of that right. If we have a right to say what we want, then we have a right to say what we want even though we speak irresponsibly. Anyone who cautions that your possessing or exercising a right is contingent on your exercising it responsibly doesn't understand the concept of a right. He or she has confused rights with privileges.

The **responsibilities** a person has as a student come in two sorts, those that a student may not violate without earning an official sanction or penalty and those that a student may violate as he or she wishes.

Among the first sort is the responsibility to pay tuition and fees. A student who shirks this responsibility is out on the street, no longer a student. Another is the responsibility to drop a course by the drop date or to accept without fuss a failing grade.

Among the second sort, responsibilities students may shirk without drawing official sanction, is the responsibility to attend class. Another is the responsibility to read carefully the course material.

Responsibilities of the second sort are responsibilities to engage in or abide by activities or customs necessary or useful for acquiring knowledge and skills or for maintaining a community of intellectuals. If you shirk a responsibility of the second sort, you risk getting poor grades. You certainly won't be learning much or enjoying the intellectual engagement universities make possible. Moreover, your behavior threatens to degrade the experience of university for your classmates and professors. But whether you shirk a responsibility of the second sort, and, thereby, take the risks or cause some trouble, is your business.

So what rights does a university student, as a student, possess? Any short list will include:

- the right to pursue any programme that she is qualified (according to academic criteria alone) to pursue
- the right to be taught well
- the right to have her work evaluated on academic grounds alone, and to be evaluated soundly on these grounds
- the right to hear from her professor why he criticized or evaluated her work as he did
- the right to use the library and any other campus facility necessary or useful to her studies
- the right to have adequate and comfortable study space, and to have adequate and comfortable classrooms
- the right to express herself freely, both inside and outside the classroom (this includes the right to speak ill of her university, her teachers, her classmates)
- the right to associate with whom she wishes
- the right to form campus clubs or societies, and to receive university funds or resources for clubs or societies according to a fair scheme of disbursements
- the right to invite visiting speakers to campus
- the right to attend classes and campus events free from disruption
- the right to due process in any academic or non-academic disciplinary matter
- the right to speak to the professor about any aspect of the course (topics, materials, means of evaluation, teaching style, classroom management, accommodations for disabilities) and to receive a response
- a student has no right to choose to ignore any aspect of the course without academic penalty, and no right to force any changes in the content or delivery of courses

I include on my own list the right to have her application to study at the university appraised in light of academic criteria alone (and appraised soundly on these criteria). Many universities today, though, give preference to applicants who belong to certain income, racial, ethnic, etc. groups. They attempt to justify departing from academic criteria on the grounds either that their social mission requires it or that having more members of these groups on campus than academic criteria alone would bring makes for a better university experience for everyone.

One institution within a university that safeguards student rights is the grade appeal process. All universities should have in place a mechanism by which students who think their final grade does not accurately reflect the quality of their work may seek to have their grade changed. A typical grade appeal mechanism is to have a standing panel of three professors who take submissions from the student and the professor to determine the academically accurate grade. Students would engage the appeals process only after consulting with the professor. Should the student, after discussing the matter with the professor, continue to think her work did not receive the grade that accurately reflects its quality, she can ask independent evaluators to appraise her work.

The grade appeal process helps to ensure that professors assign grades based solely on the quality of student work (given their own standards, of course). That a professor doesn't like a particular student should not affect that professor's evaluation of the student's work. The availability of a grade appeal process reassures the student that she may say what she wants, dress as she wants or associate with whom she wants, whatever the professor thinks about it.

Because money and resources are always tight, how much of any particular thing a student may properly expect is limited by other academic needs and rights, all in the context of the university's material situation. What makes an expectation a right is that it is to be considered important along with all other academically sound expectations. Students' rights are being violated not because students have to sit on old, creaking chairs, but because students have to sit on old, creaking chairs when professors (or, worse) administrators don't have to. Fairness is a matter of equal consideration of all academically sound expectations.

Two rights can, of course, conflict with each other in particular contexts. One student's right to speak his mind might conceivably compromise another student's right to attend a class free of disruption. Such conflicts between students' rights are actually quite rare. When someone disrupts a class or other event, the disruption typically involves the volume, manner or length of time that that person has chosen to use to express himself, not the content of his expression. The disruption, then, can be handled without compromising the disruptive student's expression rights.

Students' rights, I've said, often need formal institutional protection. A grade-appeal procedure was my example. But students' rights overall are best safeguarded by a university's informal institutional culture. When administrators and professors are keen to respect students' rights out of their dedication to creating and maintaining a community of intellectuals, these rights are not at risk at all. When concerns other than creating and maintaining a community of intellectuals motivate administrators and professors, though, students' rights—along with academic freedom and the teaching and research missions of the university—can easily come to grief.

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