

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND FACULTY GOVERNANCE

The following remarks were made to the Memorial University School of Nursing in June 2004 at the invitation of Dr. Shirley Solberg, the “SS” mentioned below.

There is a large body of literature on academic freedom, but in my short remarks this afternoon I'll be drawing mainly on the vocation of political philosophy and the experience of a former academic administrator.

There's no doubt that academic freedom is a cornerstone of higher education as we practise it today. It's therefore important that we have a confident sense of its rationale, its scope and its limits. I will talk generally about this principle and some others related to it, leaving it for SS to expand upon connections particular to Nursing.

Most of the fundamentals of academic freedom are set out in John Stuart Mill's famous essay *On Liberty*. Mill argued there that the freedom of thought and discussion is so beneficial to society that it should be accorded the protection of a fundamental right.

In the specific context of a university, a version of his argument seems particularly obvious. If higher education is recognized as socially valuable, then the purposes that define it deserve protection. But chief among these purposes is the advancement of knowledge, which only happens where there is freedom of inquiry and communication. These are the essentials of academic freedom.

Without such freedoms, we might still be able to perpetuate and transmit established knowledge. The trouble is, one cannot be confident that this knowledge is more than received opinion unless it is open to test and challenge. Philosophical theories of knowledge say that scholars only show critical respect for propositions and hypotheses by subjecting them to rigorous examination, even if they appear obviously true. This only happens when wide academic freedom is honoured.

In any event, perpetuating learning is only half the task of advancing knowledge. The rest, for the most part, is refinement and discovery. Scientific progress in the broadest sense is only possible in an environment of fearless and open inquiry. Academic freedom provides both freedom from fear and encouragement to openness.

While most of us now regard these conditions of learning as obvious, their protections have not existed for very long. It was only in the middle of the last century that the tenure system was firmly established. It finally gave university teachers and researchers confidence that they would not be dismissed for stating the truth as they see it. Only with this kind of assurance are teachers likely to use their expertise to advance their disciplines.

Of course (and this is important) rights have duties attached. Advancing one's discipline through teaching or research is central to the responsible use of academic freedom, which implies an

obligation to remain current in one's field and conform to its standards. Academic freedom thus implies acceptance of peer review. One is obliged to meet this standard in seeking to publish one's work in academic journals. One can be expected to have one's teaching peer-evaluated.

These observations show that while academic freedom is a freedom of individuals, it is clearly tied to a community of scholarship, that is, to a discipline of inquiry. Individuals are responsible for advancing the discipline and for recognizing its authority, which can be expressed in many legitimate ways. For example, courses and course content is approved by schools and academic senates that guarantee the integrity of their programs.

There is normally more freedom when it comes to conducting our courses. As instructors we are usually free to determine our preferred pedagogical approaches, for example. However, collective approval operates here as well. We are not free to skip our classes or ignore the university's regulations about testing and examination. Again, these limitations express the way that individual freedom is shared with the academic community, which retains authority over its programs.

One way of putting these points is to note that while academic freedom is related to freedom of speech, freedom of speech is a right of citizens generally. Academic freedom belongs particularly to the citizens of colleges and universities. As such, we have special obligations for teaching, research and service connected with our academic expertise.

Academic freedom is not the right to express personal opinions at the expense of completing our course syllabi. It is not the right to be promoted for research that has no bearing upon our appointment. It is not the right to use academic time to do good volunteer works. It is the right to protect academic time in order to profess one's expertise without irrelevant and unnecessary restrictions.

Though the connection between academic freedom and time is not always mentioned, it's clear that time to do one's academic work is itself in need of protection. One has to guard it jealously and resist allowing too much of it to be taken up on tasks that could be done more efficiently by others. As an example, we can devote energies to collegial administration that could often be done by fewer people or dedicated members of the support staff. One challenge of academic collaboration is appropriate delegation and the minimization of duplication of effort.

All of this holds for professional disciplines as much as for the traditional arts and sciences, but the professional disciplines face some special problems and have some particular needs. Because health research is often supported by private money, for example, universities need to be vigilant in ensuring that their scholars are not inappropriately constrained by their external sponsors. There is a large issue here, but we don't need to go deeply into it to see that inappropriate constraints on academic freedom have to be resisted. At the same time, though, we need to recognize that there are other, legitimate constraints. Among those in professional schools are ones that belong to the goals of the wider profession and the expectations of regulatory agencies.

Your educational objectives in Nursing are constrained by professional standards of the kind that receive attention during periodic appraisals of your programs. You are also limited by acts of government that require meeting standards in nursing. Hence, your curriculum is more highly prescribed than is normal in non-professional programs. This limits the latitude you have, especially in the classroom.

The special circumstances of a collaborative program may introduce further constraints, but if there are SS is better situated to speak to them than I am.