On Campus

The Value and Responsibilities of Academic Freedom

By
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We are in a time of enormous stress for colleges and universities across the country. Today, a notion we hold dear — academic freedom — is at the center of contentious debates on our campuses.

Academic freedom goes to the heart of the university, to the rights and responsibilities of faculty members and students, to the nature of teaching and scholarship. It is a freedom we share in the classroom — it encompasses a student's right to learn and a professor's right to teach.

Some of the current debates over academic freedom concern matters of national or global importance. Many are joined — even incited — by outside forces, from political pressure groups to the mainstream media to increasingly strident voices on the World Wide Web. Times like these call for a renewed understanding of the principles that support academic freedom, and the purposes they serve.

I believe that there are four principles that should guide us forward.

First, the health and vigor of universities depend upon our fidelity to the unique responsibilities of our profession. Many people say that the primary purpose of a university is to preserve and advance our understanding of life, the world, and the universe. They say that it is to discover truth, to transmit as much of human understanding as we can from one generation to the next and add as much new knowledge as we can to the existing store of human knowledge — a function that has unquestionably brought enormous benefits, practical and otherwise, to our society and to our world. I certainly do not want to challenge that primary function, but I do believe it incomplete. Universities are also charged with nurturing a

distinctive intellectual character — what I would call the scholarly temperament.

I have now spent more than three decades of my professional life in the university, and of all the qualities of mind valued in the academic community, I would say the most valued is that of having the imaginative range and the mental courage to explore the full complexity of the subject. To set aside one's preexisting beliefs, to hold simultaneously in one's mind multiple angles of seeing things, to allow yourself to believe another view as you consider it — those are the kind of intellectual qualities that characterize the very best faculty members and students I have known and that suffuse the academic atmosphere at its best. The stress is on seeing the difficulty of things, of being prepared to live closer than we are emotionally inclined to the harsh reality that we live steeped in ignorance and mystery, of being willing to undermine even our common sense for the possibility of seeing something hidden. To be sure, that kind of extreme openness of intellect is exceedingly difficult to master, and, in a profound sense, we never do. Because it runs counter to many of our natural impulses, it requires both daily exercise and a community of people dedicated to keeping it alive (which is why, I believe, universities as physical places will continue to thrive in a world of electronic communication).

But we all know what I just described from personal experience: the extraordinary, unique thrill of thinking about a subject one way until you feel there cannot possibly be another valid perspective, and then beginning with another line of thought and feeling the same certainty settle into our minds, all the while watching in amazement as it happens. Sometimes, of course, this yields new "truths," but that is not the only purpose for developing this mental capacity.

Public life poses constant pressures and temptations for the university. Within the academy, we always face the impulse to jettison the scholarly ethos and adopt a partisan mentality, which can easily become infectious, especially in times of great controversy. Every faculty member I have known is aware of that impulse and tries to live by the scholarly temperament. In the classroom, especially, where we perhaps meet our highest calling, the professor knows the need to resist the allure of certitude, the temptation to use the podium as an ideological platform, to indoctrinate a captive audience, to play favorites with the like-minded and to silence the others. To act otherwise is to be intellectually self-indulgent.

That responsibility to resist belongs to every member of every faculty, but it poses special challenges for those of us who teach subjects of great political controversy.

Given the deep emotions that people — students and professors — bring to highly charged discussions, faculty members must show extraordinary sensitivity to unlocking the fears and the emotional barriers that can cause a discussion to turn needlessly painful and substantively partial.
Second, given the expectations of a scholarly profession, we must determine how to deal with lapses, for surely we must expect them. In doing so, we must uphold certain values.

We should not elevate our autonomy as individual faculty members above every other value.

We should not accept the argument that our professional norms cannot be defined, and that transgressions thus must be accepted without consequences. We, as faculty members, properly have enormous autonomy in our teaching and our scholarship. Yet it will not do simply to say that professional standards are too vague for any enforcement. Life is filled with drawing lines about highly elusive and difficult-to-define difference, and yet we do so because to shirk the task is to invite worse consequences.

We should not accept the argument that professors are foreclosed from expressing their opinions on the subject under discussion in the classroom. Nor should we accept the notion that there are no boundaries involved whenever viewpoints are expressed. The question is not whether a professor advocates a view but whether the overall design of the class, and the course, is to explore the full range of the complexity of the subject.

We should not accept the argument that we as teachers can do what we want because students are of sufficient good sense to know bias and indoctrination when they see it. That ignores the enormous differential in power between the professor and the student in a classroom setting.

We should not accept the idea that the remedy for lapses is to add more professors with different political points of view, as some would have us do. The notion of a “balanced curriculum,” in which students can, in effect, select and compensate for bias, sacrifices the essential norm of what we are supposed to be about in a university. It also risks polarization, with “liberal” students taking courses from “liberal” professors and “conservatives” taking classes from “conservative” professors.

We should not say that academic freedom means that there is no review within the university, no accountability for the content of our classes or our scholarship. There is review, it does have consequences, and it does consider content. And this happens every day, every year, and it is properly lodged in the hands of the faculty of the departments and schools of our institutions. In appointment, promotion, and tenure discussions, as well as annual reviews, we make professional judgments about the scholarly temperament, the originality of ideas, the ability to develop students' understanding and capacities, the respect shown for students, the tolerance displayed, the mastery of the subject, and many other qualities of mind.

Our third guiding principle should be to respect what I would call the separation of university and state.

Universities do not penalize faculty members or students for comments they make as citizens in public debate. A corollary is that, while faculty members and students are free to take whatever positions they wish on public matters, universities are not. We do not, as institutions, generally speaking, take positions on public issues.

The risk in joining the public sphere is that we jeopardize the scholarly ethos. We therefore need to maintain the line between the differing roles — that of the scholar professional and that of the citizen. The last thing we want to do is to turn the campus into a political convention.

Fourth and finally: All of us, but universities in particular, must stand firm in insisting that, when there are lines to be drawn in the academy, we must and will be the ones to do it. Not outside actors. Not politicians, not pressure groups, not the media. Ours is and must remain a system of self-government.

To be sure, as we have witnessed throughout recent history, the outside world will sometimes find the academy so dangerous and threatening that efforts will naturally arise to make decisions for us about whom we engage and what we teach. That must not be allowed to happen. We must understand, just as we have come to understand with freedom of speech generally, that the qualities of mind we need in a democracy are precisely what the extraordinary openness of the academy is designed to help achieve.

As I said at the outset, this is a time of high vulnerability and anxiety at our universities. Yet I am confident that what I have called the scholarly temperament is alive and well in our institutions of higher education. I know it is at Columbia

University.

We do not need a new set of principles, tailored to the times. We need only to reaffirm the principles that have guided us for the past 100 years, that have seen our profession through times of great challenge, and that have led us toward ever-expanding horizons of human insight and the building of democratic societies.

This essay is adapted from Bollinger's Benjamin N. Cardozo Lecture, given in March to the Association of the Bar of the City of New York. It was first published in this form in the Chronicle of Higher Education *and is reprinted with permission.*

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