

Editorial

I Love Freedom

The term *academic freedom* refers to something that scholars supposedly hold sacred: the right to question and to profess a position that may not agree with prevalent thought, policy, practice, or tradition. For academic freedom to function, the institution employing the scholar must also respect the principle of academic freedom. The implications are that no matter how seemingly unorthodox the scholar's position, the institution must follow the idea penned by Voltaire, "I disapprove of what you say, but I defend to the death your right to say it" (Bartlett, 1947, p. 1053). Of course, this does not mean that scholars can ignore laws of libel and slander (holding someone up to hatred, ridicule, and contempt), nor does it mean that scholars can behave in a reckless manner, the equivalent of yelling "fire" in a crowded room when in fact there is no fire at all.

Although some institutions challenged the definition of *academic freedom* in the 19th century through intimidation and censure, the principle has come under the heaviest attack during the 20th century (Horn, 1999). Two notable examples are the cases of Edward C. Tolman, a professor of psychology at the University of California, and Revilo P. Oliver, a professor of classics at the University of Illinois. Both were remarkably different scholars with widely different research interests. Apart from their academic differences, Tolman was an avowed pacifist who spoke against war and opposed the entry of the United States into World War II (Hergenhahn & Olson, 1997). Oliver espoused racist and extreme right-wing views, had been decorated by Mussolini, and was a founding member of the John Birch society (Rahn, 1999).

Individuals in the universities that employed these two endeavored to cast them out of the community of scholars, not because they were poor teachers or because they did research of poor quality. They were ostracized because their views were contrary to what was considered "politically correct" at the time. Following America's entry into World War II, Tolman was dismissed for not signing a loyalty oath, because he contended that doing so would impinge on his academic freedom (Hergenhahn & Olson, 1997). He was reinstated eventually, after the initial hysteria surrounding the US's entry into the World War II subsided. In the mid-1960s, because of Oliver's increasing publicity of his political views and inflammatory racist ideas, there were calls in the University of Illinois for his dismissal. After considering Oliver's extreme views, his record as an excellent scholar and teacher, and the principle of academic freedom, the Board of Trustees voted 8-1 against proceeding with dismissal (Rahn, 1999). Rahn also notes that the Editor of the student newspaper at the University of Illinois, Roger Ebert (who later became a well-known film critic who appears on television), wrote that only a strong society could permit Oliver such freedom. It can be argued further that the political views of these two scholars had nothing to do with their competence as scholars and as educators, especially as there was no evidence that either advocated their

views to their students in class. This point was realized by Stephen Leacock in 1933, who at the time was a department head at McGill University in Montreal, when he recommended the retention of an individual who was alleged to be a communist sympathizer. His name was Eugene Forsey, and he later became a Senator in Canada. Although Leacock did not think highly of Forsey's teaching and ideas, he maintained that if Forsey were dismissed, he would become a martyr as few would believe that he would be dismissed for any reason other than for his political views (Horn, 1999).

Nevertheless, there are those who suggest that what comprises academic freedom should be defined narrowly, or dispensed with altogether as an anachronism from an earlier time. It is contended that some scholars use academic freedom as a justification to conduct research and to teach in ways that are contrary to current social views. In simple terms, the behavior and ideas of such scholars are "wrong." For example, Heald (1997) wrote, "academic freedom is used to defend the right to continue to teach those forms of academic discourse that perpetuate and justify the centering of white, western, masculinist thinking" (p. 116). Although it may seem seductive to stamp out those views that are abhorrent to a majority of people at a particular time, often such facile solutions raise more problems than they solve. By not permitting different views, no matter how inherently "wrong" they seem to be at a given moment, do we not imply that such views are more powerful than those deemed "correct," because the "correct" views cannot stand up to criticism? Also, what is considered to be proper and improper is often fluid, as demonstrated by the case of Edward Tolman.

In another vein, most scholarly institutions encourage scholars to seek and obtain outside funding for research projects. Funding is sometimes provided by corporations that wish the scholar to evaluate a particular product or method. In the light of calls for narrowing the definition of academic freedom, what should be done about the scholar who ascertains that a product being studied is harmful to people? Because the corporation is footing the bill for the research, should they have the last word as to whether the findings are made public? If such a Faustian bargain is struck, and the corporation decides to claim that the product is safe, then proceeds to market it, is it appropriate in possible subsequent legal action for scholars to rely on the Nuremberg defense, "I was only following orders," as was used by many high-ranking Nazis?

This is not idle speculation. A few years ago such a case arose in Canada when Dr. Nancy Olivieri, a researcher associated with the University of Toronto and the Hospital for Sick Children, found that a drug she was under contract to test was harmful to some patients. Although Olivieri felt duty-bound to reveal her research findings, the company producing the drug endeavored to prevent her from doing so, and it also had her removed from the research project. In spite of her claim to academic freedom, the hospital did not provide her with legal assistance, and it was only after protests from other physicians and the public that the hospital began to investigate the matter further ("Research ethics," 1998). Perhaps through ignorance, or perhaps purposely, the hospital appointed an investigative committee that was chaired by a physician who had had previous dealings with the drug company ("Dr. Nancy Olivieri,"

1999). By this juncture, considerable attention was focused on the incident, both from within academe and from the public, with the result that when the committee recommended further action against Olivieri, the biased and questionable practices of the committee were exposed and condemned. As in the case of Edward Tolman, the trampling of Olivieri's academic freedom was finally recognized, and she was vindicated, reinstated, and promised legal assistance by the hospital should it be required ("Text of Olivieri," 1999).

Is it appropriate for an academic institution to act against a scholar who criticizes a corporation or organization that is presently on friendly terms with that institution for fear of losing those friendly terms? In other words, do institutional or corporate considerations outweigh the principle of academic freedom? I believe that they do not. Yet although the issue of preserving and practicing academic freedom is of interest to many scholars, some of my colleagues have said that they could not care less about academic freedom. Their reasons for maintaining this position fall into two general categories typified by the statements, "I want to do research that is appreciated and valued by the administration," or "I just want to be left alone so that I can do my job without putting my family's welfare at risk," thus implying that for them academic freedom does not exist. Perhaps, then, the greatest danger to academic freedom does not come from scholars who advocate extreme or heretical views, or even from those who assert their right to academic freedom, but from those who are apathetic, cowardly, or who would prefer to leave the issue to someone else. If scholars abrogate their responsibility for the practice and defense of academic freedom, then who assumes that responsibility?

References

- Bartlett, J. (1947). *Familiar quotations* (11th ed.). Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- Dr. Nancy Olivieri. (1999). *Athabasca University Faculty Association Newsletter*, 2(2). Retrieved August 28, 2001 from <http://aufa.ab.ca/newsletter/991020.htm#nancy>
- Heald, S. (1997). Testosterone leadership: Hegemonic masculinity, masculine protest, and "crisis" in the universities. In R.W. Nelson (Ed.), *Inside Canadian universities: Another day at the plant* (pp. 109-127). Kingston, ON: CedarCreek Publications.
- Hergenhahn, B.R., & Olson, M.H. (1997). *An introduction to theories of learning* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Horn, M. (1999). *Academic freedom in Canada: A history*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Rahn, K.A. (1999). *Biography of Revilo P. Oliver*. Retrieved August 28, 2001 from http://karws.gso.uri.edu/JFK/The_critics/Oliver/Oliverbio.html
- Research ethics vs. corporate interests: Investigator's disclosure fuels ethics debate. (1998). *CAUT Bulletin*, 45(7), 1, 6.
- Text of Olivieri/HSC Agreement*. (1999). Retrieved August 28, 2001 from <http://www.utfa.utoronto.ca/html/press/html/olivieri.agreement.htm>