

Free Speech on Campus: Debate on Campus and the Role of Universities in Balancing Rights

Freedom of speech on campus is one of the most visible issues within university culture in Canada. It is particularly present in my mind at the moment because Professor Jordan Peterson is scheduled to speak at my school, Queen's University, this coming Monday. Jordan Peterson is a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto. Professor Peterson first attracted the attention of the Canadian public when he caused a stir over his refusal to refer to students by gender-neutral pronouns. He has since been a lightning rod for the campus free speech debate. His lectures and speeches are often attended by noisy protests¹, and he has become a symbol for many people who hold conservative viewpoints for standing up to so-called politically correct, or "PC", culture.

Professor Peterson was invited by Professor Bruce Pardy; who attracted attention for writing a controversial op-ed in the *National Post* in August 2017 about how students with mental health problems should not receive accommodations for evaluations². So far, I have been invited to the event itself, The Anti Jordan Peterson Protest, and the Anti Anti Jordan Peterson Protest. I anxiously await my invite to the Anti Anti Anti Jordan Peterson Protest.

The idea of pervasive PC culture in universities that these two men see themselves as standing up against is a fairly common talking point among right-leaning media pundits. The view was articulated back in 2014 by conservative media pundit Rex Murphy in his regular opinion column in the *National Post*. The title of that column was "Institutes of Lower

¹ "Free Speech Under Attack," in The National, CBC , April 17, 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5g9AlCQFaM&t=7s>.

² Bruce Pardy, " Mental disabilities shouldn't be accommodated with extra time on exams," National Post, August 17, 2017, accessed February 28, 2018, <http://nationalpost.com/opinion/bruce-pardy-mental-disabilities-shouldnt-be-accommodated-with-extra-time-on-exams>.

Education". Murphy wrote that universities, particularly humanities and social science departments have

...have descended into pseudo-studies, become infatuated with low pop culture, become obsessed with faddish social justice issues, turned hypervigilant on their students' "comfort levels" and are pruriently concerned with sexism narratives, cause politics and "identity" zealotry³.

Murphy's comments represent a wider view that Universities have become left-wing echo chambers that coddle students and hamper debate.

As a humanities and social sciences major, I strongly disagree with the popular notion that universities have become ideologically uniform places that hamper debate. That isn't to say that there isn't a problem. For example, Lindsay Shephard, a Teaching Assistant (TA) at Wilfred Laurier University, was harshly disciplined for showing a video of Professor Peterson talking about gender-neutral pronouns in order to spur debate in the tutorial she was leading. She was called into a meeting with two professors and verbally reprimanded until she was in tears⁴.

What the faculty at Laurier did was disgusting. It was disgusting both because they treated a member of their department with incredible malice, and because their attitudes have the potential to damage the intellectual experience of their students. The only way to have an intelligent opinion about a controversial topic is to engage with different viewpoints on it and these professors' reaction to Ms. Shephard's efforts to do that do a tremendous disservice to students.

³ Rex Murphy, "Rex Murphy: Institutes of lower education," National Post, September 27, 2015, accessed February 28, 2018, <http://nationalpost.com/opinion/rex-murphy-institutes-of-lower-education#comments-area>.

⁴ Aaron Hutchings, "Inside Lindsay Shepherds controversial battle over free speech on campus," Macleans.ca, December 11, 2017, accessed February 28, 2018, <http://www.macleans.ca/lindsay-shepherd-wilfrid-laurier/>.

While the incident in Laurier brings light to a real issue that needs attention, it is not fair to make the judgement that many pundits did about how it reflects all of modern academic culture is misguided and inaccurate.

In my year and a half of academic studies at university so far, I have had challenging discussions with my classmates about the ethics of sweatshops labour, prison reform, bias in media, Quebec's law banning face covering when receiving public service, and much more. I have encountered a wide spectrum of political views in every single one of these discussions and not once has it devolved into a shouting match or been hampered by a teaching assistant or professor telling the class what to think. People respectfully have debates and offer eye opening perspectives. I have been incredibly fortunate to have had instructors that assign diverse material and work incredibly hard in class to facilitate discussion. This doesn't mean that there are not professors who overstep their roles, but it does mean that the modern university experience remains a far cry from how it tends to be characterized.

This ability to have an intelligent debate extends beyond the classroom. I sit on the editorial board of *The Queen's Journal*. The editorial board meets twice a week and debates two opinion pieces from various media outlets, selected and voted on by the board, per meeting. We have debated topics such as intellectual diversity on campus, the minimum wage hike in Ontario, and Professor Pardy's comments about students with academic accommodations. Sometimes we have similar views, sometimes the room is divided. Our debates can last over an hour and a half. No matter how different our views are, we can always find some common ground that our editor can turn into a publishable editorial. People respond to and often take issue with other views on the board, but the tone is unfailingly respectful. Even after a controversial week, we still work as

a team to get the paper published, and we still go out together on Friday night once our work is done for the week.

Despite the demonstrated ability of young people to have intelligent debates on controversial topics, the issue of free speech still comes up, often rather dramatically. Scenes of student protestors disrupting controversial speakers are a common sight on most news networks.

While the actions of protestors are often way out of line, it isn't always nuanced debate that they are obstructing. The upcoming event at Queen's is a discussion about compelled speech between Peterson and Pardy. These two men have similar views on the topic and they are presenting their point of view. If dissenting views are not part of the event itself, then it makes sense for dissenting views to be seen in protests. The presence of protestors is an element of a democratic process, not a hindrance to it. Problems occur only when the protests get out of hand.

University protests have a history of being heated, but the contemporary issue is that the change that protestors seem to be trying to enact is that the viewpoints presented at these controversial talks cease to be present in university life.

Their desire to not have such views on campus isn't entirely unfounded. A rally in support of free speech featuring Professor Peterson last year at the University of Toronto resulted in a student screaming a string of vitriol about transgender people into a microphone. The student's exact words were "...Do you think these people are loved, do you think they are listened to? No! For tattooing your body and cutting off your genitals?"⁵.

⁵ "Free Speech Under Attack," in The National, CBC , April 17, 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5g9AlCQFaM&t=7s>.

Transgender students don't deserve to be targeted like that in their place of study, nobody does.

The issues that spark these kinds of events are extremely controversial and lines can easily be crossed. Universities have always been hot spots for this. They need to take responsibility for it.

McMaster University has begun drafting guidelines for appropriate behavior during protests. The current draft acknowledges that picketing, protesting and organizing events presenting counterarguments are an important part of debate. The draft guidelines also stipulate that actions like blocking entrance to the event and making noise that interferes with the speakers ability to present their point are a violation and will be dealt with by security⁶.

Guidelines like these are part of the solution. Protests are vital to the democratic process but protests that block speech spur further division and change nobody's mind. Furthermore, speech that crosses lines into hate speech needs to be dealt with if students' dignity is to be upheld.

There are ways to combat opinions that single out vulnerable groups that don't involve banning speech. This is a delicate balancing act.

On one hand, if one wants to defeat ideas one considers harmful, there needs to be debate. If we don't want certain views out there, we need to defeat them through debate, not

⁶ "McMaster releases first public draft on freedom of expression guidelines," The Silhouette, February 16, 2018, , accessed February 28, 2018, <https://www.thesil.ca/mcmaster-releases-first-public-draft-freedom-expression-guidelines>.

limits on speech. This is because everyone has the right to express their views, and because blocking certain viewpoints only tends to entrench division.

On the other hand, groups like transgender students or students with mental illness should not have to give up their dignity along the way.

There are ways of standing up to views one considers harmful that respect the rights of people to express their views and are far more effective than blocking entrance to a talk. Regarding Professor Pardy's opinions on academic accommodations, the university's policy protects students from discrimination. The administrative arm of the university handles all requests for accommodations. Professors are not allowed to veto them. This protects students from discrimination based on the personal views of a professor.

As a society, we have civil liberties that allow us to express ourselves, but we also have limits on the cruelty with which we are allowed to treat each other. Rights are balanced. We have the right to free speech, but also the right to be free from discrimination. In order to figure out how to balance those rights, we need debate.

Professor Pardy has the right to express his views. Those views can be challenged by protest, in live debate, or in written responses. There have been well-thought out responses to Pardy's op-ed, one I will link to here is a blog post by a PhD student who has disabilities that allow them to have extra time for evaluations. Their response points out flaws in Pardy's argument in a specific and thorough way⁷. This student's response accomplishes what blocking Pardy's speech can never do; it challenges the argument by engaging with it. If the rules put in

⁷ "According to Bruce Pardy, I Shouldn't be a PhD Student," Crippledscholar, August 21, 2017, , accessed February 28, 2018, <https://crippledscholar.com/2017/08/21/according-to-bruce-pardy-i-shouldnt-be-a-phd-student/>.

place to protect students with disabilities from experiencing discrimination from their professors are to have validity we need to allow the opportunity for opposing views to be expressed and debated. Those making the rules can evaluate the decisions they make based on the outcome of public debate.

Right now, universities seem to be making an effort to protect the dignity of students through policy; this should continue. To go along with this, they need to recognize the ways they interact with free speech debates both in and outside the classroom and seek to promote safe and productive discourse. I know from my own experience that, despite public perception, students and faculty at universities are more than capable of having that debate. We need to uphold the rights and dignity of all members of our communities, but it matters how we go about it.