Are there any universities in Canada? Thoughts on punishing students who chant an ode to rape

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To be a university, an institution must be a place in which people value intellectual integrity. That is, its members must be concerned not only that they and their fellows believe truly and value soundly, but that they and their fellows believe and value for the right sort of reason. Reasons are of the right sort only if they bear on the truth of the beliefs or the soundness of the values.

Reasons are the wrong sort, then, if they are reasons of utility or agreeableness.

People who value intellectual integrity will want themselves and others to remain free from all pressures to believe or value other than the pressure of argument or evidence, for only beliefs or values held on the basis of argument or evidence are held for reasons that bear on truth or soundness.

Thus, to be a university, an institution must be a place of wide freedom of expression, and not a place that sanctions methods of forming or altering attitudes that don't bear on truth or soundness. It cannot punish expression without becoming something other than a university, though it might retain the title "university."

A university wouldn't punish students who chant an ode to child-rape, for instance. At a university, the only mechanism of order and control would be critical discussion. Those who act poorly might expect to be invited to a free and open discussion of their behaviour, a discussion conducted at a theoretical level, not a personal one.

I'm not sure there are any universities in Canada. I might be wrong, but it seems that there's a lot of shutting people up and punishing people for bad behaviour going on these days. Universities prefer to respond with the authoritarian option rather than the intellectual one.

There are few or no universities in Canada today because few people, both inside and outside our institutions of higher education, value intellectual integrity, or at least value it more highly than other things. Students, governments, business and industry, university administrators, even many professors value jobs, success, the economy, social justice, and the environment more than they do intellectual integrity. I needn't add that some of these groups hold the purse strings.

Of course, most administrators and professors do value intellectual integrity and the freedoms necessary to it, but primarily as means to other ends: we hear that university education creates critical thinkers or good citizens, young people able to adapt to changing circumstances and to make a difference to the world. But taken merely as a means, intellectual integrity must compete with other means. Should administrators fear that a speaker will threaten to create a hostile environment by arguing that ours is not a rape culture, for instance, or that subsidizing

aboriginal identity harms aboriginal people, they will cancel her engagement quickly, whether under pressure from students or professors or not. Their argument will be that a hostile environment would compromise one or another of the ends they cherish for itself.

Administrators will, at least, pronounce *ex cathedra* against the speaker's views and the judgement of whomever invited her.

Not just might there be no university in Canada; it's likely that there could not be one, at least not without first a great lot of political and social change in the country as a whole.

There are two arguments here. First, the call of the values for which people are willing to compromise intellectual integrity is extremely strong. Second, because none of their experience so far has been within intellectual culture, students coming to university lack the attitudes that would support a concern for intellectual integrity.

People who accept these arguments but nonetheless value intellectual integrity think we have to settle for institutions that only approximate universities. We need sets of firm rules for both professors and students if our institutional space is to be well ordered, and only if our institutional space is well ordered can we begin to initiate our students into (and ourselves remain within) the life of the mind.

Even if that conclusion is true, we could probably manage with more unforced discussion and less regulation, humiliation, and punishment than university administrators favour. The first thing to do when a crisis occurs is to organize discussion groups and draw on the expertise of academics to lead them, not to humiliate students with required sensitivity training.

Let me end with a few words regarding the normative question here. Suppose in Canada today a university could exist. Suppose that despite its libertarian and anarchic structure, it could survive and even thrive. Should we even want there to be a university?

The answer depends, I think, on two things. First, whether enough people are keen on intellectual integrity. Second, whether serving intellectual integrity would prevent us from honouring those thing we might value more.

Not many people are keen on intellectual integrity; most people value their identity, and wilfully leaving elements of one's identity open to critical scrutiny can be painful. It can feel like disloyalty. That I think is the sound reason a person might have not to want to be part of a university.

The second argument, though, fails, for people who are indeed committed to intellectual integrity will already be respectful of others. Perhaps even more important, they are people who cannot be offended or hurt psychologically by the attitudes or opinions of others.

Here's a grand impossible experiment: Ask each academic in Canada to choose between working at an institution marked by restrictions on expression and other civil liberties, with order maintained by rules and regulations, and working at a university. Send members of the first group to work on some campuses, members of the second group to different ones. We will all, then, be only with our own. Then let us see which institutions tend to do best.

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