Academic Freedom

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Introduction

"Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition."

The above quote is taken from the introductory text of the ***1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*** and is a guiding premise for the teaching community. Part of the goal of Portland Community College's *Practicing Pluralism Project* is to promote diversity, tolerance and understanding in our world and specifically in our institutions of higher learning. So, if the concepts of academic freedom and tolerance for diversity are pivotal to the pursuit of pluralism, one might justifiably ask, what exactly is academic freedom? How is it related to tolerance for diversity in our classrooms? And how might those of us who are a part of an institution of higher learning go about understanding and fostering these ideas on campus?

Definition of Concepts

Academic freedom is rooted in ***freedom of speech*** for both teachers and students. And an inclusive and truly diverse learning environment would be a place where students feel safe in respectfully expressing their relevant viewpoints, pertaining to the specific subject matter at hand. However, academic freedom *does not* mean that teachers and students can simply say anything they wish.

In academe, what is considered to be "legitimate" perspectives are clearly defined by professional peer reviewed research, published scholarship, lectures at professional conferences, and other professional events. When students come to college with their personal opinions and life experiences, sometimes these views contradict accepted scholarly and disciplinary perspectives. It is the job of college-level teachers to accurately represent their fields in the classroom and to encourage respectful and critical examination of these legitimate topics within the academy.

Referring back to the aforementioned ***1940 Statement***, it clearly implores teachers to *"be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject*." Academic freedom also requires that teachers "*should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not*

speaking for the institution." While issues of controversy may not occur in some disciplines, for educators dealing in the humanities and the social sciences, for example, introducing and examining so-called *hot topics* (like religion, racism, homophobia, and sexism) may be an everyday part of their curriculum.

So, it seems clear: teachers should foster a classroom atmosphere of, above all, *respect*. Critical discussions of legitimate and relevant issues should be guided by the standards of rigorous, professional scholarship in the appropriate fields, and personal opinions should be distinguished from accepted academic and scholarly viewpoints. Of course students come to college with a variety of world views and life experiences, not all of which will be concurrent with their instructors', other students', or even accepted scholarly opinion of the day. College is a place to bring together this diversity for the purposes of discussion, learning, and critical analyses. With respect to honoring pluralism, diversity, and divergent worldviews, it is up to teachers to foster classroom environments that allow for respectful exploration that is relevant to their particular discipline's subject matter, in an honest and empirically truthful manner. But how are instructors to do this? Below are some techniques, tried and true for some college-level teachers, to try in the classroom that foster pluralism while maintaining and exemplifying the guiding principles of academic freedom. Following that is a real-life case study example from right here in Oregon, dealing with issues of academic freedom and legitimate research.

Techniques for Fostering Pluralism in the Classroom

* Teachers should ***check their empirical facts and their sources*** before sharing them in the classroom.
* Be ***honest*** with students and distinguish between your personal opinions (which may be appropriate to share at times, depending on the subject matter) and academic research and facts.
* Perhaps ***introduce many different theoretical perspectives*** into your subject matter and teach students to critically employ all of these views, while still centering on your own discipline's uniqueness and orientation. (For example, a psychology instructor might bring in history, biology and perhaps even sociology to compare and contrast with psychology's particular views.)
* Introduce relevant ***current media events*** dealing with global, multicultural and cross-cultural events. Depending on the discipline, an instructor could make assignments from this (using newspapers, film, TV, music, the internet) or even offer extra credit options dealing with pluralism.
* Integrate ***on-campus fieldtrips*** dealing with diverse issues and make them relevant to your subject matter. Lectures, musical performances, artistic displays, *Illumination Project* performances, etc. are offered most, if not all, terms at Portland Community College.

A Case Study Example

The *Illumination Project* performances present many contentious issues. Approaching these issues can be very difficult and, perhaps, even a little unsettling. However, we feel that by fostering an environment where students and faculty can engage in an open, constructive dialogue on difficult subjects, we can promote understanding, tolerance, and a more positive learning experience for everyone.

Since we're talking about engaging in *constructive dialogues*, we should talk about how these dialogues—on any subject—play out in an academic setting. Academic freedom is a centerpiece of academic dialogue. To help demonstrate what we mean by academic freedom—and its importance to what we're doing—following is an example from a recent news story from Oregon.

Background

In January of 2006, an Oregon State University graduate student had the results of his forest research published in the prestigious scientific journal *Science*. The research concluded that logging forests after a fire could be more harmful than letting the forests recover naturally. Some professors at OSU objected to the research and tried to prevent it from being published; then, the federal government suspended funding for the final year of the student's research project (the funding was later reinstated).

What does this case have to do with academic freedom?

Since academic freedom is about an open exchange of ideas, there was concern that some of those ideas—in this case, the student's research—were being restricted from the exchange of ideas on forest practices. It's important to know that before any study is published in the journal *Science*, the research is reviewed by independent scientists who verify the validity of the research. Thus, when the professors at OSU objected to the student's paper, there was concern that they were squelching his conclusions because of outside pressures from the forest industry (which provides funding to OSU's forestry school).

Why is it a problem if the professors or the government suppress the student's research? And is it ever acceptable to suppress legitimate research?

The answers to both of these questions are related. First, we want to be clear we're talking about *legitimate* research. Legitimate research is that which is accepted as worthwhile by experts in the field, and again, guided by a rigorous professional peer review process. In the case of the OSU student, his research was supervised by a professor, federal grant money was awarded, and the findings were reviewed by independent scientists. In short, the student's research was legitimate, and that's why it was troublesome that the people in power wanted to suppress it. Academic freedom dictates that the legitimate research would be published, and the professors who disagreed

with the student's conclusions could publish their own rebuttal. Thus, academic freedom provides for an open debate.

To read more about this issue, see Michael Milstein's article in The Oregonian, "Behind the OSU forest report furor." 22 Feb 2006.

Questions for Reflection

It is impossible to imagine all of the potential issues that may arise in a classroom setting revolving around questions of academic freedom and pluralism. This website resource, related to PCC's *Illumination Project*, is particularly interested in examining the topics of race and ethnicity, as well as religious tolerance, as they relate to academic freedom. Therefore, we leave you with some questions for reflection that deal with these very important areas of inquiry, questions related to the rest of the information found in this website.

* How might students' as well as instructors' own social locations in terms of race, ethnicity and religion affect their tolerance for others' diversity within a classroom setting?
* Because students and instructors experience racism (both internalized and institutionalized forms) and religious intolerance in different ways, how might these experiences play out within academic arenas?
* How might members of privileged racial, ethnic and religious (versus those persons who experience oppression surrounding these very same issues) learn to appreciate that people have differing backgrounds and value systems, as a part of their academic learning?
* Particularly in terms of spiritual practices and beliefs, how might issues of academic freedom and classroom learning impact students and instructors who perhaps do not agree?
* How do students as well as educators bring together the myriad philosophical and ethical components involved in discussions dealing with such emotional and controversial issues as religion, spirituality, race, ethnicity, privilege and oppression?
* Think of a contentious classroom discussion or debate that you've been a part of. How did academic freedom apply? Were there comments or viewpoints that seemed to fall outside the boundaries of academic freedom? What challenges do we face in determining the limits of academic freedom?

Resources

1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure. American Association of University Professors.