

Impediments to Academic Freedom: Is the Wolf at the Door?

A Review of


End of Academic Freedom: The Coming Obliteration of the Core Purpose of the University

by William M. Bowen, Michael Schwartz, and Lisa Camp

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Reviewed by

Dana S. Dunn 

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 . . . Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning. It carries with it duties correlative with rights.

—1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, American Association of University Professors

If the authors of *End of Academic Freedom: The Coming Obliteration of the Core Purpose of the University* are correct, then the proverbial wolf is already at our collective collegiate doors. Problems on campus and in higher education are much worse than they appear to be. It's not all about enrollment, endowment, rises in tuition, worries about eroding faculty benefits, or the overreliance on adjunct faculty members to deliver the academic program. No, it's much worse than all of these admitted challenges, as professional—professorial—conduct is at stake.

Let's be clear at the start: This is not a book about psychology per se. This is a book about *the university* (an umbrella term representing colleges and universities both great and small) as both a source and protector of knowledge, and as a social and cultural generator of ideas. The book is part screed, part sociological investigation of the university, and part bellwether for worrisome trends in the landscape of higher education today. The authors are

concerned—alarmed is a better word—at what they see as a more than gradual erosion of institutional emphasis on knowledge and ideas. Anyone who has spent any time on virtually any college or university campus is aware of the causes for this deleterious change, including a growing emphasis on students as headcounts in admissions, education treated as job preparation rather than liberal education, the loss or reassignment of existing tenure-line hires, and ever-pressing revenue challenges since the Great Recession. The authors suggest these and other problematic developments point to the greatest challenge of all—the loss or passive abdication of academic freedom, which will lead to a cascade of consequences that will undermine academe’s core purposes of teaching and learning.

Threats to Academic Freedom

The term *academic freedom* entails free and open inquiry by faculty members. Teachers, scholars, researchers, and educators should both enjoy and exercise a freedom to teach and share ideas, facts, and controversies without fear of real or imagined retribution, including repression, job termination, or even imprisonment. The five perilous threats discussed in *End of Academic Freedom* are, in brief and in turn, the following:

Authoritarianism

Authoritarianism is more than just a hierarchical and dangerous political philosophy; it is an affront to free and open campus discourse. At many colleges and universities, there is a tacit encouragement to (as the authors put it) *accept and believe* rather than to *question and think*. The painful irony here is that while faculty members exhort students to question and think about virtually everything, as professors they often receive messages from on high that accepting and believing institutional fiat is desirable and that dissent is unwelcome. Authoritarianism can manifest itself as a person (a president, a provost, a department chair, a senior colleague) or a group (a committee, a board of trustees or regents), and its perpetrators rarely recognize their own behavior or attitudes as despotic or oppressive.

Supernaturalism

Supernaturalism is the culprit whenever claims (often religious ones) that cannot be reconciled with logic and scientific knowledge are nonetheless championed. Naturally, supernatural beliefs that quash science are most likely (but not exclusively) to occur at colleges or universities with ties to fundamentalist religious worldviews. Providing a safe haven for discussions of “intelligent design” rather than a vigorous, empirically based debate would be a case of supernaturalism in action. So, too, could claims that “global warming is not due to human activity or industrialization,” a case where politicized wishful thinking, not religion per se, acts as the driving force.

Corporatism

This peril may be the most familiar one, as calls for vocational training at the expense of liberal education are increasingly commonplace. Oddly, corporations themselves are not the only source of this consumerist perspective—so are parents, politicians, and students who

see “getting a good job” as the sole reason for baccalaureate education. Evidence of corporatism abounds when too much emphasis (a little is fine and often useful) is placed on quantification and the assessment of outcomes-oriented teaching and learning, rendering the college degree into a mere credential and an education into just another commodity. Students who unknowingly espouse a corporatist line say things like, “I came to the university to get a job, not to get educated” (p. 167). Truth can be stranger than fiction.

Illiberalism or anti-liberalism

Liberal values are not the opposite of conservative values, as illiberalism doesn’t entail our familiar political polarization in the U.S. congress; rather, such liberal values involve a mindset that “recognizes, appreciates, and respects the systematic unity of reason” (p. 138). The dignity and freedom of the individual matters, especially so that faculty members as teachers, scholars, and professors—who indeed profess— “are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it” (Jefferson, 1820). As the authors put it:

[L]iberal thinking places primary value upon the freedom for humans as individuals to be able to privately develop themselves through whatever way of living they pursue into a state of perfect self-mastery. Such precepts typically have little to nothing to do with blind compliance with various rules or dogmas—social, religious, political, or otherwise. Instead, they tend to relate to the respect that individuals should have for themselves, for others, and for the natural environment. (p. 139)

Political correctness

Political correctness occurs when people avoid particular expressions or actions that are perceived to marginalize, exclude, ignore, or insult groups who are considered to be socially disadvantaged or are recognized as the frequent targets of discrimination. The way this form of academic reserve now manifests itself on campus is that faculty members avoid any intellectual situation where any discourse-based conflict, whether major or minor, could erupt. Open political or policy debates disappear because both speaker and audience are made uncomfortable by the frank words exchanged in public disagreements. The fear of triggering acrimony leads to complacency and increases the risk of compliance with or capitulation to objectionable decisions.

Encouraging Discourse to Deal with Discontents

The authors of this book, professors Bowen, Schwartz, and Camp, possess the gravitas necessary to both make and support the claims in *End of Academic Freedom*. Some readers may find the book to be a bit polemical, but each author has toiled in the scholarly vineyards of teaching and publication, and each of them has also served in one or more administrative posts. Thus, they have lived in the often-heady world of teaching, scholarship, ideas, and arguments, and then the more pragmatic world of administrative leadership, fiscal restraint, and policy creation and implementation. To their credit, they do not just identify the challenges to campus life where academic freedom is concerned. They also point to possible solutions or, in their words, ways to “survive the threats” and reemerge

with ideas intact. I will not steal their thunder here, but Chapter 8 recommends some practices to revive or change campus cultures so that academic freedom and open inquiry flourish again (e.g., moving from a campus culture of traditions to one of experimentation where open debate and inquiry are encouraged). Whether these recommendations are sufficient remains to be tested by readers who are moved to action by the arguments found in *End of Academic Freedom*.

Who will benefit from reading this book? Whether psychologist or not, any academic who is concerned with the drift and shift in academic values that appears to be happening on many, if not most, campuses in the United States will want to become familiar with the work's portents. Since it is something akin to a call to arms (or at least minds), I do not believe this is the sort of book to be read in the solitude of one's own ivory tower or philosophical armchair. This is a book about an imperiled community as well as an imperiled "sense of community," and how shared visions and traditions are under assault, sometimes in apparent ways and other times in more subtle but still corrosive ways that often masquerade as "necessary" choices or decisions. Colleagues who value institutional shared governance or who are constructively active in campus politics (I am thinking here of faculty senates and the like) should read this book; indeed, they should consider forming discussion groups or panel presentations.

Administrators from the top on down, from presidents and provosts to deans and department chairs should read this book if only to learn why so many of their faculty colleagues are restive and restless, if not resentful. Bowen, Schwartz, and Camp are not really telling us what we don't already know—they are giving us a nuanced and reflective, if sometimes distressing, account of it. Trustees and regents, too, should read this book if only to try to understand the critical faculty worldview that likely puzzles or annoys them. The university was conceived to be a place apart from the worlds of commerce, government, and even private life—this feature is a key to maintaining academic freedom, and nonacademics should be aware of this fact.

If the wolf is truly at our door, we need to stop ignoring or placating it. Instead, we need to address it with sober confidence and the intellectual resolve that has gone missing of late.

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