312. How University Administrators Should Deal with Complaints

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Newsletter of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship
January 2024, Number 97
https://safs.ca/newsletters/issues/nl97.pdf

Recently at my university, the Vice-President, Academic and Research, summoned a professor to her office to tell him about a complaint some students in one of his classes had brought her. The students were upset about the professor's "gratuitous and frivolous use of a racial slur" during a classroom discussion. (The professor wasn't shown the written complaint; the academic vice president quoted these words from it.) The complaining students also wrote that they were annoyed that the professor had called on the next scheduled student to give his presentation before all of them could fully voice their outrage; and they noted accusingly that the professor seemed unmoved by their trauma.

The academic vice president had called the meeting with the professor simply to pass on the information that the students had complained and to let the professor know the content of their complaint. She told the professor that nothing was under investigation and that no formal procedure would begin against him, and she didn't even suggest that the professor watch his words from now on.

That's how these things should go, one might think. The complaint lacked merit. The professor hadn't treated any student unfairly and hadn't insulted or harassed anyone. The complaint itself didn't allege unfairness or harassment; it simply registered an objection to the professor's speaking a taboo word. Speaking taboo words in the classroom or on the campus is not (yet) an offence against any rule of conduct (I'm not actually sure about that, but let's suppose). An academic vice president with little commitment to academic values or to the academic mission of her university might have called for an investigation of the incident or even initiated a disciplinary procedure. This particular academic vice president, though, took no further steps with the complaint. She simply let the professor know that there had been one. She acted well.

I contend, on the contrary, that in this case the academic vice president did not act all that well.

She acted better than one would expect. I grant that. She certainly could have acted much worse and many academic administrators do act much worse. The previous academic vice president at my university, for instance, would likely have taken the complaint to the university's president and recommended that the professor be called to a disciplinary meeting. At other universities, professors have been reprimanded, suspended and even terminated simply for what they have said or for the (non-threatening, non-harassing, non-insulting) way they have said it. It's a sad fact that the bar has been set so low for academic administrators that not acting badly is often lauded as acting well.

Many academic vice presidents would have acted worse than my academic vice president did, but some, to give credit, would have done pretty much just what she did. Let me provide a couple examples from universities other than my own. A psychology professor talking to her class about children used the phrase "boys and girls," and some of her students complained, holding that that phrase hurtfully excluded those children who don't fit neatly into either category. The students complained not to an academic administrator but to an equity, diversity and inclusion officer within the university's Human Resources unit. The EDI officer called the professor to a meeting. Happily, the EDI officer simply informed the professor of the complaint and that was that. It could have been worse. Then again, as I will argue, the students and their complaint should have been handled differently and much better.

Another case of a student complaint against a professor who spoke a taboo word, in this case "transgenderism," involved the professor's dean calling the professor in for a meeting. The dean passed on the information that someone had objected to the professor's using that dated and bigoted word, and that was the end of the complaint's travels. But this case was worse than the other two, for the dean advised the professor to be careful regarding student sensibilities. Now, of course, there's nothing wrong with, and a lot to be said in favour of, professors talking with each other about teaching, even when the talk is personal and direct. Maybe there are good reasons why that professor should be more in tune with student sensitivities. This, though, wasn't a discussion between colleagues, but rather a case of a dean speaking to a professor under colour of his office.

We can understand the pressure on administrators and non-academic staff members who receive complaints about what a professor has said to take the complaint further, to launch an investigation, even to initiate disciplinary procedures. Letting the complaint die or officially dismissing it might call for courage. Those who brought the complaint, or their supporters, can easily mount a campaign against the administrator or staff member. Halting the progress of even an entirely meritless complaint can land an administrator in hot water. Academic administrators and non-academic staff members serve at the pleasure of the university's president. The president won't reward them for standing up for academic values if doing so draws attention. Indeed, the president might ask for their resignation.

I wonder whether in cases like the ones I've mentioned, the academic administrator or Human Resources staff member has called the professor to a meeting simply to appear to be taking the complaint seriously. The administrator can say to the complaining students that she's doing what she can. She summoned the professor and she talked to him. If she doesn't call the professor in for a meeting, the complaining students might take their complaint elsewhere and, moreover, file a complaint about her, as well.

Nonetheless, although it might take courage, an academic administrator should not call a professor to a meeting about a meritless complaint, even merely to inform the professor about it. Any complaint about what a professor has said is a complaint entirely lacking merit. Administrators who, on their own initiative, without beginning an investigation or disciplinary proceedings, drop or dismiss meritless complaints are to be commended. But those who are committed to academic values will not summon the professor to a meeting. For doing so is precisely to give the complaint weight and to create an anti-collegial superior/subordinate relation between her and the professor.

An academic administrator or Human Resources staff person committed to academic values will instead meet with the students to explain to them why their concerns and objections do not constitute a complaint. Students are *apprentice* academics or intellectuals. It is rare for a student to understand and appreciate academic or intellectual life. They need to be initiated into academic ways and to be guided to see the point of such ways. This is certainly true of students who would complain about what a professor said or how he said it.

Ideally, a university is a place at which people who value their own ability and commitment to think for themselves, and who value the ability and commitment of others to think for themselves, gather to think hard about difficult matters. Thinking for oneself involves sensitivity to the pressures of evidence and argument, but only to the pressures of evidence and argument. We fail to think for ourselves when our thinking is deflected by our hopes or fears—the hope of belonging, for instance, or the fear of being ostracized. Thinking hard about difficult matters requires being open to all avenues of inquiry. We aren't thinking hard when we close off possibilities for inquiry because they disturb or upset us.

Because we want to leave others free to follow the evidence and the argument where they lead, we refrain from trying to change their minds or behaviour by engaging their hopes or fears. That is why we do not voice complaints about what professors or students say or how they say it. We might voice criticisms, of course, and, if we actually have a criticism, we fail as academics when we keep it to ourselves. But a criticism is an argument that an idea is false or a value unsound. A criticism is not a call for an authority to impose itself on our community by issuing a ruling.

When we call for an authority to step in, we destroy the collegiality that should characterize the interpersonal relationships within our academic or intellectual community. Calling for an authority is to seek power over others, to try to bend them to our will. Criticizing someone, on the other hand, leaves it up to them to evaluate our reasoning and to come our way or not, as they themselves see fit. If someone reforms their behaviour after an authority has been summoned, we cannot know that they did so because they have seen the light. We can have no reason any longer to think that they are candid and open in their relations with us. Ours is no longer an academic or intellectual community.

All of this is what a university official who is committed to academic values would say to students who bring her a complaint about what a member of the university community has said or about how he said it. The official would explain the disdain for academic ways implied in the desire of the students to have their complaint heard by an authority. She would instruct the complaining students to take their concerns to the professor himself and to engage with him in critical discussion. If the professor sees the force of their arguments, he will change his ways on his own. If he doesn't see the force, or sees it but ignores it, it is for them to adapt and to extend tolerance to the professor. There is a chance, the official might add, that it will be the students who change their minds or their sensibilities, not the professor, but she best not insist on this, so that the students might more easily take credit for coming to their change of mind by thinking for themselves, by fearlessly following the argument where it leads.

The officer to whom the students have brought the complaint might worry that the students won't take their concerns to the professor because they are afraid that their grades or their relation with

the professor might suffer. She should be able to reassure them that professors committed to academic values will not let criticism of their ideas or ways influence their grading or spark hostility. She could also mention that the university has a grade-appeal process to ensure that a student's course grade accurately reflects the quality of that student's work; grade-appeal processes protect the academic freedom of students.

I suppose there's no harm in the administrator or staff member one day coming around to the professor's office to tell him that some students had got together to bring her a silly complaint. But I don't see why she would want to inform the professor. The students have either spoken to the professor about their concerns, if they still have them after talking with the officer, or decided their time and effort would be better spent elsewhere. Setting out to let the professor know that something was afoot among his students isn't to do much more than to engage in gossip, gossip, moreover, unflattering to junior members of the university community.

To sum up: Even an administrator who, quite properly and perhaps courageously, lets a meritless complaint die on her desk shirks her responsibility to members of the academic community if she doesn't sit the complainant down and explain why the complaint lacks merit and how meritless complaints are destructive of the academic ethos of their university.

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