

Academic Freedom: An Idea at a Cross Roads

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“Man is never so authentically himself as when at play” (Friedrich von Schiller, 1795)

The purpose of this paper is to situate academic freedom at a cross roads. The intersection is that of the traditional path through which academic freedom came into conception and practice and the other path is the critique. The paper uses the historical case of Frank Underhill at the University of Toronto during WWII to discuss the complexities of academic freedom. The remainder of the paper briefly traces the history of academic freedom, and make pertinent connections to the present context. The paper ends with questions for further consideration, leaving the idea of academic freedom at a cross roads.

Vignette

On August 23rd, 1940, Professor Frank Underhill (1885 – 1971) of the History department of the University of Toronto was part of a conference panel discussing, “A United American Front.” There was much to discuss given the fall of Denmark, Norway, and Low Countries in Europe to the Germans because the war was going badly for the allies. Around the same time, writes Michiel Horn (1999), Prime Minister McKenzie King and President Franklin D. Roosevelt were meeting to discuss a Permanent Joint Board on Defence. So, speaking five days later at a public venue, when Professor Underhill suggested that Canadians now had “two loyalties, the old one to the British connection involving our backing up of Britain, and the new one to North America involving common action with United States” (cited in Horn, p. 154), it seemed unexceptional to most listeners. However, this public speech did ignite sufficient objection to make his life difficult. The president of the University of Toronto, Rev. Henry John Cody, received numerous letters, some from influential quarters, urging that the historian Underhill be fired – for instance, former PM Arthur Meighen privately urged the then Minister of

Justice Ernest Lapointe to intern Underhill (Horn). Underhill was attacked in the public media too – newspapers and radios – for being unpatriotic and speaking on issues he has no business speaking (Cameron, 1996).

There was some support for Underhill as well. In fact, Rev. Cody received letters from both sides – those demanding that Underhill be dismissed and those in support of his actions of having delivered the speech based on his analysis of the situation. And after a lengthy and divisive deliberation, the Governing Board of the university was finally persuaded by Cody that dismissing Underhill would be undesirable. In recounting his experience to a friend, Underhill wrote, “... What saved me was chiefly the argument that it would look terrible in the U.S. just now for a professor to be fired for his pro-American sentiments...” (Horn, 1999, p. 156).

Discussion

This case has been the corner stone in discussions around academic freedom and has been discussed extensively elsewhere (see for example, Cameron, 1996; Horn 1999). I propose to take up only three issues here: a) what authority do faculty members have in regards to political, social, and historical matters?; b) what pressures do higher education administrators have concerning academic freedom?; and c) in what ways do power relations operate when academic freedom is exercised? I will take each of these in order here.

A. Authority of faculty members in regards to political, social, and historical matters

This question has two aspects: First, there is the question of the general case of authority of faculty members, and second is the issue of authority to speak on matters of politics, society, and history. Concerning the former, although at that time there was no Canadian teachers’ union to protect the rights of professors, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) existed. Earlier that same year, the AAUP had issued the *Statement of Principles on Academic*

Freedom and Tenure which has since served as the basis of academic freedom and tenure for many universities and many similar organizations. This statement recognized that university professors were more than mere employees of the governing boards. The General Report of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure, drafted in 1915, stated,

The responsibility of the university teacher is primarily to the public itself, and to the judgement of his [sic] own profession; and while, with respect to certain external conditions of his vocation, he accepts a responsibility to the authorities of the institution in which he serves, in the essentials of his professional activity his duty is to the wider public to which the institution itself is morally amenable.

(AAUP, pp. 22-23)

Adopting the spirit of the quote, it appears obvious that Frank Underhill was well within his rights and perhaps even morally obligated to be serving the public by offering his insights on political trends. Few today would argue in favour of Underhill's confinement based on this incident. And yet, that is precisely what happened – although Underhill was not dismissed, he was advised by the president not to speak publically on sensitive political issues. Underhill complied to the President's request and retained his job. Later on, in his personal correspondence, he would describe the entire affair as “the nastiest business I've ever gone through” (cited in Horn, 1999, p. 156).

This incident happened merely 68 years ago. It took another 16 years after this case and following another incident involving infringement of academic freedom rights (that of Harry Crowe) that faculty union, Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), acquired the right to participate in challenges against academic freedom and tenure for its members. On the one hand, the history of academic freedom as an instituted policy is relatively recent when

compared to the history of university institutions as a whole. On the other hand, over two generations of faculty members have passed through the university system since the Harry Crowe affair and the problem concerning academic freedom is still unresolved. CAUT to this day continues to examine, report, and raise funds in support of academic freedom.

The second issue concerning the authority of faculty members as pertains to social, political, and historical matter – such as Underhill was tackling – is more complicated and divisive. The question becomes, what authority do faculty members have in sharing their views concerning social and political matters when these domains are considered more interpretive, i.e. unlike science. It is essential to briefly describe the lineage of modern day university in order to explicate this argument. In the Middle Ages, when post-secondary institutions were largely denominational their main function was to teach the young the approved word of God and scripture; not to criticise it or invent new knowledge. The teachers in these institutions were not allowed to question the word or doctrine of the church of their affiliation. Metzger (1961) traces a marked shift in the role of post-secondary institutions between 1800 and 1860 as denominational colleges faced two problems: internal disorder and financial insolvency. In order to respond to the internal disorder, the number of faculty in the colleges was increased. To address financial insolvency, denominational institutions sought secular support which led to the weakening of religious aspirations. As a result, the hold of the Church began to loosen. In these secular institutions faculty members now could engage their creative and rational resources and universities became the seat of creating new knowledge. Spurred by the success of the discoveries and predictions of Newton, Galileo, and Descartes, science and the scientific method became the means by which to settle debates concerning the problem of knowledge. The

scientific method was characterized by objective observations, repeatable experiments, and verifiable results.

The matters of policy that Underhill was tackling in his public speech, the argument goes, did not lend itself to the scientific method readily and so were mere personal opinions, best left to politicians. This sensibility was dominant and was responsible for awarding the right to create new knowledge only to faculty members pursuing areas of research that were amenable to hard-core scientific method. In fact, it is owing to this trend that many disciplines tried to pass themselves off as technical or scientific. However, concerning issues of policy that Underhill was commenting on, Aaron Wildavsky (1979) writes

The technical base of policy analysis is weak. In part its limitations are those of social science: innumerable discrete propositions of varying validity and uncertain applicability, occasionally touching but not necessarily related, like beads on a string. Its strengths lie in the ability to make a little knowledge go a long way by combining an understanding of the constraints of the situation with the ability to explore the environment constructively. Unlike social science, however, policy analysis must be prescriptive; arguments about correct policy, which deal with the future, cannot help but be wilful and therefore political. (p. 16)

In other words, no matter what methods are employed, prediction on policy matters is bound in politics.

This line of argument suggests that every faculty member, irrespective of what field they specialize in, has the right to speak out on issues of their expertise. So, if Underhill's comments were political, because they were in keeping with his know-how, he was within his rights to offer

his prediction. This directly leads to a further complexity that needs to be addressed. What freedom should be afforded to faculty members to venture outside their professional areas?

This question, however, assumes that there is a fixed and immutable interest that is manifest in people in general. Robinson (2002) seems to denounce this assumption and argues using Kant's moral theory. Recall that Kant's moral theory (deontological ethics) situates human rationality as the pinnacle of human achievement. This exceptionality exists because we are rational beings and owing to this rationality we occupy the realm of the intelligible. However, we are not merely causal machinery of science but rather introspective thoughtful beings who understand that we are morally free. This line of reasoning ushered in the idea that what really defines human beings is their freedom. This adopted in the academic realm leads to the notion of free play of ideas and by implication to academic freedom – a person has the right to shift one's focus as and when intrinsic interests or extrinsic forces compel one to.

This is one of the tenets of academic freedom. However, in practice the university institution is prone to discouraging drastic shifts of focus by faculty members. The case of the polymath professor Marcel Danesi published in *University Affairs* in 2007 illustrates this. He is a professor of anthropology, and Italian, and semiotics, and communications theory. He states, "I always saw as counter productive any narrow specialization which said I will do that, and only that thing in a career" (University Affairs [UA], para 3). Although faculty may see such obstacles as counter productive and restrictive, the university admin may approach this diversification differently. The university administrative structure and hierarchy erected obstacles and impediments in Danesi's career early on, despite his stellar publication record and glowing teaching reviews. Danesi recalls,

I was told at the beginning, “You are going to go nowhere, because you have no area of specialization”... I wrote for textbooks; they counted for nothing. I did the trades; they counted even less. They could have even been a negative... the only thing that counted at work was when I did scholarly work on the Italian language.

(UA, para 14)

Finding a place for Dr. Danesi at the University of Toronto became quite a challenge as he was dubbed as someone who keeps changing his disciplinary identity. While the degree to which Danesi’s interests are diverse is unique (and not sufficient grounds for censure), cross appointments between various departments and interdisciplinary studies are not so rare.

B. What pressures do higher education administrators have concerning academic freedom?

All this freedom and free play of ideas does however cause considerable headaches for educational administrators. On the one hand there is more freedom demanded, desired, and defended by faculty members. On the other hand, there is pressure from the society at large, and governing and funding bodies in particular, for the university to align itself and its members to the societal norms. These two pressures may tug at administrators in opposite directions. The former manifests itself in the form of academic freedom to explore new ideas and critique the status quo, the later in the form of public accountability demanding the preservation of traditions, customs, and values. The curricular responsibility rests with faculty members, but the institutional obligation is left to educational administrators.

The pressures owing to academic freedom are revealed when the work of an academic is understood. To explain this, Robinson (2002) writes that if one were to point to an institutional means by which to carry through the kind of contemplative life that Aristotle had in mind¹, one

¹ that is the life on the isle of the blessed, where one devotes oneself to the contemplation of first things for the sake of keeping company with what is best and most worthy

would inevitably come to the idea of university. In secular universities where faculty (and students) need not submit to some core precepts of a religious doctrine, they can truly lead a contemplative life. In this living, a person's critical rational resources are admissible modes of contemplation. These, however, by their nature, are (inevitably) prone to take a sceptical turn, a doubtful turn in the direction of incredulity, ambiguity, and confusion whilst one attempts to resolve issues through contemplation. It is this notion of introspection, critique, and improvement, furnished as a result of exercise of academic freedom that universities are capable of sustaining, supporting, promoting, and guiding. In this, universities become the veritable social engines of self perfection. In absence of academic freedom and the pursuits that Robinson mentions, universities are reduced to merely transmitting acquired wisdom without critical thought or growth. Universities would diminish in their role and function. Consequently, university leaders and administrators have the tough job to ensure that faculty members have due freedom to perform the corresponding tasks.

Thinking back to the Underhill case, Rev John Cody was pressured on both sides – those in support of Underhill were championing the cause of academic freedom on one side. And on the other, those demanding his dismissal were upset that Underhill was bucking traditional hierarchy of diminishing loyalties to Britain. The people in favour of dismissal were incensed that a public official would criticize the actions of the master that feeds him. Such disputes are tough to resolve for the administrator and expose embedded issues of power. This leads to the last point.

C. In what ways do the power relations operate when academic freedom is exercised?

Before a discussion of power can ensue, understanding of power becomes crucial. Using the classical analysis of power, I will briefly describe the demarcations and its application to the academic freedom case of Underhill.

First Dimension of Power

Robert A. Dahl conceptualized power in his 1961 influential work entitled, *Who Governs?* by investigating the political decision-making process in the city of New Haven. Dahl concluded that decisions are made, not by an ideal democratic process but by the powerful elite who exert their influence explicitly. Three features surface prominently in the first dimension of power: a) it is exercised explicitly: In accordance, Fowler (2000) writes, “the first dimension of power consists of **explicit** exercises of power, which are often directly observable” (p. 30, emphasis in original); b) it is exercised in formal institutions: Pfeffer (1981) writes, “when power is so legitimate, it is denoted as authority” (p. 4) and forms the basis of decision and action in various institutions, including educational institutions. Moreover, the use of power is recognized by all – those exercising it and those who do not have the power to do so; and c) it is measured in outcomes of the decisions: the bluntness of the first dimension of power is so extreme that its effectiveness is measured on nothing short of obtaining the desired outcomes of the powerful elite.

Based on the works of Dahl (1961), Mann (1992), Robinson (1995), and Wrong (1979), Fowler (2000) describes that there are three major sources of power in the first dimension: material resources, social resources, and knowledge resources. Material resources include such commodities as, time, money, energy, control over careers, and suchlike. Social resources include things such as official position, personal impact, popularity, social status, access to

money, and the media and legal system. Knowledge resources include control over information, intelligence, understanding of how the system works, inter alia.

Within the context of academic freedom, the first dimension of power can be seen operational in instances when the faculty member, owing to his/her position within society, provides expert advice on the subject matter of his/her expertise. Conversely, when the powerful elite prevent a faculty member from offering input on a subject, this constitutes an instance of the explicit use of power. Again, the case of Frank Underhill being told to not speak his views publicly demonstrates this phenomenon in action. Although such obvious restrictions of rights are not frequent, they still do occur. Dr. Nancy Olivieri's high profile case (see Thompson, Baird, & Downie, 2005), in which she was restricted from publishing her findings concerning a drug use by the co-sponsor of the study (Apotex) and subjected to various kinds of harassment, is an example of the exercise of explicit power of the nature described here.

Second Dimension of Power

Bachrach and Baratz (1962) criticised Dahl's (1961) conception of power and proposed a second dimension to the understanding of power. It is characterized by the implicit use of power. In this dimension, few, if any, actors realize that power is being exercised. Unlike in the first dimension where agendas are dictated by the powerful, in this dimension, meaningful participation of certain groups is limited. As well, "issues that can be raised for debate through devices less obvious than agendas" are used (Fowler, 2000, p. 35).

If the first dimension concerns itself with the explicit exercise of power, the second dimension has to do with the "mobilization of bias" (Fowler, 2000, p. 30). Concerning academic freedom, the operation of the second dimension of power is evident in marshalling norms, customs, organizational structures, procedures, rules of the game, social usage, and traditions.

For example, implicit power is evident in grant funding agencies outside the universities insisting that only certain methodologies, techniques, and customs be followed and used. Within the university, it is manifest in faculty members instilling in their students that they use customary methods for conducting research. In the Underhill case, the reason for reprimand for his public speech was because he challenged existing norms of bringing into question Canada's loyalty to Britain, and in this Underhill transgressed the second dimension of power.

Third Dimension of Power

While the second dimension of power goes on to critique the behavioural nature of the first dimension of power, according to Steven Lukes (1974), it does not go far enough. Lukes accuses the 2-D view of ignoring the institutional, systemic, or organizational exercise of power, stemming not from individual wills, but from the bias of sociological or political structures. It is therefore that Fowler (2000) contends that the third dimension of power deals with the "shaping of consciousness" (p. 30). Instead of taking the conflict driven view of power as has been conceptualized and presented in the first two dimensions described here, the third dimension deals with the "most effective and insidious use of power [which] need not involve conflict, at least not conflict between desires or preferences" (Reidel, 1977, p. 306). Concerning its far reaching effects, Fowler writes,

All of us have been on the receiving end in this dimension of power, for all of us have undergone the far-reaching acculturation that is the main business of childhood. Several social institutions are especially important in shaping consciousness. The family is the most crucial, in part because people first learn language within it... The family also inculcates beliefs and values, and its patterns

of interactions also shape consciousness... Schools and religious organizations also play a major role in shaping the way people see the world. (p. 39)

These different sources – families, schools, language, among others, shape our consciousness and Fowler calls them “communication processes, myths, and symbols” (p. 30).

In Reidel’s (1977) reading of Lukes (1974), two salient points arise: a) the first and second dimensions of power allow the influence of power to be exerted over individuals, whereas the three dimensional model allows the influence of power to range over institutions and social structures as well; and b) the first two views construe affects as intentional activity (although beginning to be unobvious in the 2-D model), Lukes’s model (3-D model) permits it to be non-intentional and unknowing.

Consequently, it is not hard to accept that the deeply entrenched customs and traditions of the roles of faculty members, the roles of universities in relation to societies, and the roles of the administrative cadre within the university, all operate simultaneously to shape the public’s desires and expectations of them. Any challenge to the status quo by way of exercise of academic freedom undermines the grand narrative constructed by existing power structures. Even universities, to a great extent, help retain these structures and power dynamics. Certain practices concerning the education of students have remained relatively unchanged over centuries. An example cited by Peter Markie (1994) in *A Professor’s Duties* illustrates this point. He states that with all the changes that have occurred in the universities, there are certain power relations that have remained intact – professors for the most part retain and exercise the lion share of the power in a classroom. They decide the curricula, assessment schemes, and support they choose to give students. In short, individual autonomy of professors is without bound. These characteristics have withstood a lot of changes in educational institutions, although one cannot

ignore the developments that are slowly appearing. These changes being restrictions imposed on the autonomy of professors' choice of curricula and assessment by various professional accrediting agencies and the emergence of various policies in universities. This brings into question as to whether faculty members' academic freedom is infringed upon. But this too is the exercise of power that falls either under the first or second dimension. Self correction of these trends on the part of professors, according to Lukes's (1974) and Fowler's (2000) categorization of power will fall under the third dimension, as it would be understood as an effort to alter the embedded practice, i.e. status quo, or influence entrenched teaching practices.

In short, power as an underlying concept of policies is an undeniable fact. The task here is to understand the role of power and policies so that we can understand the intended and unintended affects and constraints that social systems that use social policies as levers of power put on us. Concerning academic freedom, it becomes the tool with which these deeply rooted assumptions and traditions can be criticised. In addition, cases wherein violation of academic freedom is reported, having the knowledge base of the third dimension of power can help explicate hidden power dynamics.

The preceding discussion of Professor Frank Underhill's case establishes at least three important aspects of academic freedom. It also shows academic freedom to be a mechanism that is used to bring into question old traditions, ways of doing things, and charting out into new territories as one chooses. And yet, this analysis is neither definitive nor comprehensive in establishing the need (or not) for academic freedom. To truly situate academic freedom as an idea at a crossroads, a detailed exploration is necessary.

Inherent Tensions

The purpose of recorded history, amongst other things, is to inform the public for no one can experience everything that can be experienced. And yet for moral and intellectual unity of a society (and even progress), some things – morals, ideals, principles, are to be remembered and held in common among its community members. Every culture, society, and nation confronts the issues of documenting how things *are* in their times for the benefit of those to follow. Equally important is the task of interpreting that which preceded in any era, so as to draw from or learn from the past. These activities require “a certain fairly high level of education” (Shils, 1972, p. 4), which in turn require the existence of institutions with teaching staff – it is of no consequence for this function whether the places where instruction happens are palaces, schools, privately or state conducted academies, or universities. This is where intellectual institutions come onto the scene – schools, churches, newspapers, and suchlike. Shils comments on the objectives of these institutions:

Through these, ordinary persons, in childhood, youth, or adulthood, enter into contact, however extensive, with those who are most familiar with the existing body of cultural values. By means of preaching, teaching, and writing, intellectuals infuse into sections of population which are intellectual neither by inner vocation nor by social role, a perceptiveness and an imagery which they would otherwise lack. (p. 5)

In other words, some of the places where this instruction is to happen preserve cultural values, traditions, and attitudes. As a result, this instruction shapes our worldview. However, the authority and legitimacy of these sources is not always a settled issue.

The co-founder of Wikipedia, Larry Sangar, delivered a lecture on April 19th, 2007, entitled, *Who Says We Know: The New Politics of Knowledge*. In it, he problematized the phrase, “everybody knows.” Those knowledge claims that do not enjoy the favour of media, education, or reference sources are called, in his lexicon, *background knowledge*. The nature of this background knowledge is such that if you ascribe to it, you are considered, “stupid, crazy, or immoral,” or even “maybe all three” (Sangar, 2007, para 5).

This power to decide what is in the foreground and what is in the background is enormous and what constitutes the “politics of knowledge” (Sangar, 2007). Understandably, the politics of knowledge changes over time. In the Middle Ages what we knew was what the Church approved. After the advent of the printing press and the Reformation, what was known was controlled by state censors and the licensors of publishers. With the rise of liberalism in the 19th and 20th centuries, the bastions of knowledge were publishers themselves, and with the rise of media outlets, the control of what found its way into mainstream was controlled by those in charge of broadcast media – in all cases, “by a small, elite group of professionals” (Sangar, para 8). Sangar opposes these small groups and favours the “democratization of knowledge” which empowers the public at large and takes away exclusive – first, only, and last – say on matters, and is good for all. However, the downside of collective authorship, instead of selective authorship, is that “our grasp of and respect for *reliable information* suffers” (Sangar, italics in original).

Shils’s (1972) observation is spot on – we cannot experience everything first hand and therefore need to be able to depend on reliable accounts furnished by others. If the sources of these accounts are in dispute, then we have a problem. The problem is to whom do we turn to? Shils suggests that intellectuals are the right sorts of people to turn to and Robinson (1997)

asserts that, institutionally, universities are the best places to turn to. Applying Robinson's understanding then, faculty members serve the role of the intellectuals. Intellectuals in universities and universities themselves perform at least two functions: a) teach others; and b) describe expressive dispositions of a society – "its aesthetic tastes, its artistic creations, or the ultimately aesthetic grounds of its ethical judgments" (Shils, p. 5).

Admittedly, intellectuals do not exclusively hold the final word on these matters, but they hold a major share of the responsibility to share their findings and know-how, know-what, and know-why. Indeed, intellectuals' role is not all passive as the two described functions suggest, rather, creativity and originality are also prized in certain institutions. Shils (1972) writes, "where creativity and originality are emphatically acknowledged and prized, and where innovation is admitted and accepted, [it] is perceived as a primary obligation of intellectuals" (p. 6).

Understandably then, the role of the intellectuals and universities in general is to perform many tasks.

Understood in this manner, the disagreements between scholars/intellectuals are not only inevitable, but necessary. Shils (1972) calls this conflict "intra-intellectual alienation or dissensus" (p. 7) and submits that it is the crucial part of the heritage of any society. In essence then, the disagreement of some (few or many is of no consequence here) scholars with the prevailing norms is disagreement of those scholars of the past (or present), whose prescriptions have found their way into the mainstream of entrenched practices. If Robinson's (1997) thesis is that knowledge advances through debate and disagreement and is the basis of the foundation of universities, then not only should such disagreement be tolerated, but promoted.

This dissensus or critique is only valid and can be practiced, if one is given autonomy to bring into question the status quo without fear of reprimand. This is a corner stone of academic freedom.

Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is a complex term. One reason for this complexity is that it is composed of two words – *academic* and *freedom*, each of which are rich and complex in their own right. Another reason for the complexity is attributed to the fact that the idea of academic freedom existed well before the term was coined. For instance, Socrates, was tried and convicted for corrupting the minds of youth through his belief in freedom to explore and teach what he felt like, however sacred or untouchable. The term academic freedom poses a dilemma because modern language terminology (or nomenclature) is used to defend an old idea. Russell (1993) writes, “The words ‘academic freedom’ have often caused confusion because they come from a medieval intellectual tradition which pre-dates most of the current meanings of ‘freedom’” (p. 1). Consequently, many definitions of academic freedom have been proposed.

The central feature of the majority of the definitions of academic freedom seems to be the ideal of not restricting means, modes, or areas of self-corrective investigations of natural, social, and political functions. Professors who have academic freedom have the right to pursue what they want and how they want. For exercising this responsibility, they are guaranteed continued employment. In other words, scholars enjoy shelter, not from scrutiny of their assertions, but from assault and reprimand because of their assertions. I use the term responsibility because it is an onerous task to, at times, go against the grain and speak truth to power.

Horn (1999) offers the historical lineage of the modern day concept of academic freedom. He explains that the root of the modern conception of academic freedom comes from the German

word *lehrfreiheit* which literally means freedom to teach and publish², which was coined by Prussian scientist, explorer, and public servant Alexander von Humboldt. This Humboldtian ideal influenced the research-oriented universities in Germany and found its way to American universities after the American Civil War. In North America, John Hopkins University was the first to put this ideal into practice in 1876. Horn identifies the reason for this influence as “most of its [John Hopkins] early professors had studied in Germany” and its graduate school, like the German faculty of philosophy, was “devoted to the task of research” (p. 7). In short, the idea of academic freedom, in its present incarnation originated in Germany and although it was attempted to be adopted world over, the deficiencies in its application were numerous, constant, and unending. Within the Canadian context, Horn writes that the ideal was not always realized: “Even in research universities, the professors did not get full *lehrfreiheit*” (p. 7, italics in original). Ironically, it was when academic freedom was absent or retracted that its benefactors came to realize its importance and use. Joan Scott writes, “It is precisely in [the] loss [of academic freedom] that abstract principle acquired concrete reality” (as cited in Nelson & Watt, 1999, p. 23).

As stated earlier, during its early stages, academic freedom was only the privilege of a few. It was awarded to those whose work was deemed “of recognized scholarship or scientific productivity and who had held a teaching or research position for ten years” (Horn, 1999, p. 11). This practice was a small but crucial step in the general adoption of academic freedom.

With the AAUP’s declaration of the Tenure statement in 1915 under the leadership of Dewey, the independence of the professoriate was asserted and the professors from then on were to be autonomous and free, akin to other professions such as law. Since eight of the thirteen signatories of the report had been educated in Germany, the Humboldtian influence on the

² It is a compound word – the root *lehr* from *lehren* meaning *to teach* and *freiheit* meaning *freedom*

declaration was evident. There were also expectations that the individuals would “limit themselves to teaching subjects in which they were competent by virtue of their scholarly work” (Horn, p. 11). An emphasis on scientific inquiry was the primary reason for this shift. Cameron (1996) contends that due to the increased importance of the sciences, universities changed from a “place of study of established knowledge” to a place where “rigorous analysis and experimentation” was just as central, leading to the “formation of new knowledge” (p. 2). It is imperative to note that the purpose of academic freedom was not for material or professional benefits of professors, instead it was the “*sine qua non* [end product] of independent inquiry” (Cameron, p. 2).

These ideas of academic freedom, or perhaps the ideals of academic freedom, however well meaning, did not prevent assaults on it right from the start. Frank Underhill’s case described in the beginning of this paper is an exemplar of this phenomenon. Indeed it would be accurate to state academic freedom developed as a result of assaults on it. Infringements on academic freedom are numerous, unending, and from varied sources. Literature on the history of academic freedom is full of cases, citing ways in which academic freedom was suppressed and sometimes the heavy costs that scholars had to bear for opting to exercise their academic freedom. The sources of attack on academic freedom have ranged from the usual suspects (governments, funding agencies, board of governors, etc.) to unexpected ones (like peers and university administrators). Before the discussion on the sources of attack on academic freedom can ensue, it is imperative to understand the conditions that made these assaults possible.

Bok (1982) in a continuing explanation of the rise of the influence of universities offers that with the increased enrolments of students into post-secondary institutions after the world wars, coupled with the desire of faculty members to influence social and political decisions,

universities no longer operated in relative isolation of the 19th century. In return for aligning themselves to meet these goals, universities enjoyed (much needed) greater financial support from the public purse. As advantageous as it was to the universities (economically at least), the conditions which were attached to the funding severely hampered the autonomy of the universities and often they were obliged to carry out the social and political goals of the governments and financiers that supported them. In short, universities turned into multiversities (Kerr, 1963).

With the loss of autonomy and with conditions tied to the operations of the universities, the idea of academic freedom came under severe strain. When the assertions of professors were in opposition to or challenged the status quo, the pressures on them were severe enough so as to necessitate the abandonment of their research, assertions, or mode of inquiry and delivery. Concerning this aspect, the literature is ripe with examples from all over the world. Persistent attacks on academic freedom have, in the long run, made certain professors unwilling or unable to speak truth to power. Over time, faculty members may abandon the responsibility bestowed upon them by society to speak truth to power, and instead may use academic freedom as a currency which they choose to use, as and when it suits their purpose. This has further ignited passionate attacks on the academy for being overly privileged and protected at the same time, unlike any other profession (save for judicial judges), without exerting their influence over the affairs of the world. If academic freedom is to continue to be regarded as an essential part of the academy then the professoriate must take on the mantle and exercise the responsibility of academic freedom, even when the cost of exercising it is inconvenient.

Does the professoriate understand this? Is the safeguard provided by way of tenure to preserve academic freedom so that professors may speak truth to power merely a right? Or do

those who enjoy tenure have societal responsibilities? Should academic freedom continue to be awarded to faculty members, or is it an old vestige of an era gone by? As an aspiring faculty member these questions plague me. As a researcher in this area, I face a dilemma: what methodologies are best suited to unearth the muckiness that undergirds an unexamined and assumed right of professors?

References

Available upon request