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Aeon J. Skoble

Bridgewater State University, askoble@bridgew.edu

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Free Speech and the Function of a University

Aeon J. Skoble

Various candidates for “the purpose of the university” have included seeking truth, advancing social justice, developing citizens. None of those by itself is correct, though the first one is part of the correct answer, and the others may have a subordinate role. The purpose, the *telos*, of the university is jointly (a) the seeking of truth and (b) educating students. By “educating students” we should not mean “telling them all the truths.” This is partly because we don’t yet know all the truths – I’ll come back to this point in a moment – but also because it’s an important characteristic of higher education that students learn how to discover truth on their own. This is especially noticeable in my home discipline, philosophy. Students in introductory classes sometimes express frustration that I won’t just tell them which theory of ethics or metaphysics is correct, and I explain to them that it’s not that I don’t think this one is better than that one, but that it’s not my job to simply tell them what I think the answers are. My job is to equip them to figure out the answers on their own. This

model of education is connected to the conception of truth-seeking that I included in my initial statement. To be a truth-seeker is not to be a dogmatist. One must be aware of the possibility of error and seek the best answers with an attitude of epistemic humility. But that needn’t imply skepticism or relativism. Indeed if relativism were true (and what would *that* mean?) then there’d be no truth to seek.

My contention is that there are truths, and a scholar’s job is to seek them. A professor’s job is both to seek them, and to help students understand the world better. In some contexts there may be

pluralism: not every issue has a one-size-fits-all solution. In some there may be no definitive right answer. But in other cases, there may well be. Seeking the truth, then, can mean different things for a philosopher, a physicist, a historian. In each of these cases, though, educating the students looks much the same: While I may be convinced that the correct answer to problem A is X, my primary task is to better equip you to think about problem A. That typically means showing you answer X, but also answer Y. You will have to learn how to distinguish the two, and what might make one more

coherent and satisfying than the other, as well as whether some third answer Z has been overlooked. So, the epistemic humility that is baked in to the model of truth-seeking I am using is also a part of the pedagogical process.

That is not to say that professors do not add value through their own experience and expertise. If you have spent 30 years intensively researching some topic, then your interpretations and theories are important contributions to the students’ education. But this happens in a manner somewhat analogous to apprenticeship. The student learns how to interpret and theorize, in part, by observing and thinking about the professor’s process. To take a concrete illustration: I interpret the city in Plato’s *Republic* as *not* a political blueprint for the ideal state, but as an extended allegory for the soul. When I teach ancient philosophy, I tell the students that’s my interpretation (and that it’s not original to me), but also that other scholars disagree. My interpretation is therefore not framed as dogma, and seeing what my reasons are is part of the education process for them. So while part of the function of the university is teaching, “teaching” should not be construed as exclusively conveying finite information. Obviously, there are factual matters which need to be conveyed, but higher ed is typically more than just that.

The Scholarly Mission and the Educational Mission

The educational component of the university can’t be divorced from the scholarly component. A university faculty is a community of scholars pursuing truth in a variety of contexts. Scholars in different fields pursue truths about different things and in different ways. What qualifies us to participate in the educational mission *is* our participation in the scholarly mission. So yes, truth seeking is at the heart of the university’s function. But perhaps it’s more useful to understand truth-seeking as an ongoing

process, where we continually look to acquire wisdom, never reaching a smug complacency. This means inquiry is continual and not static. As a *community* of scholars, we have obligations to each other, obligations of civility in diversity, for one. As each of us pursues truth, we may disagree with each other. This disagreement is not only to be expected, it's potentially of value, both to ourselves as part of the dialectical process, and to our students as a model of how varying theories respond to

conversation was philosophy, but more often something else: sports, politics, art, family events. Having these regular interactions had turned this department – some conservative, some liberal – into a group of friends who could discover their commonalities as well as their differences. Twenty-one years later I'm pleased to report that this tradition has never vanished (though it was interrupted by Covid, sadly), and indeed although we have very different views on philosophical matters, we

with stagnating opinions which cannot be challenged, and which ossify into dogma. The dialectical process is cut off, and ideas cannot be tested. Since they cannot be tested, they cannot really be known to be true. There cannot be a pursuit of truth without freedom of inquiry. But freedom of inquiry is a toothless concept without freedom of speech and expression. If I cannot speak or write of my findings, my inquiry is largely fruitless, and certainly can't be of any value to anyone else.

Universities must, then, in order to fulfill their mission, protect freedom of expression both by observing formal procedural guarantees, and by helping foster a climate where the connection between truth-seeking and diversity is understood and valued.

each other. But for this disagreement to have these productive virtues, it must take place in a context of civility and mutual respect. If I think your ideas are wrong, I can and should provide a counterargument, but not insult or demean you as a person, denigrate your discipline, or imply that you're acting in bad faith. Civility between disagreeing colleagues also models healthy behavior for our students.

If a department cultivates a culture of collegiality, it can become a place where members regard each other as friends or partners despite methodological or substantive differences. For a concrete example, when I was first on campus for my job interview, I was told that the department had lunch together every Monday. Sometimes

share a common interest in managing the department, designing curriculum, dealing with other departments and administration, and doing the best by our students. When our department has disagreements about substantive matters, we assume good faith, we don't resort to personal attacks, and we don't let it interfere with cordial social relations. The general attitude that this practice fosters is conducive to not only a smoothly functioning department but to a culture of truth-seeking.

If the pursuit of truth is the function of the university, then there can be no value more central to a university than freedom of inquiry. If inquiry is impeded, the pursuit of truth is hindered or even prevented. We lose the ongoing pursuit of wisdom and are left

Free Speech

What is free speech? Let's begin with what it is not: (a) Slander and libel, (b) threats and intimidation, and (c) fraud are not part of free speech in any conception of liberalism (morally or legally). Free speech is the means by which ideas are tried out and confronted by other ideas, which is the only way to learn and grow. Free speech allows all members of a community to express themselves without fear of censorship or retaliation. Free speech is how progress is achieved in morals and science. Free speech is our surest way to differentiate knowledge from dogma and prejudice.

Some have suggested that the mission of the university is to advance social justice. But you can't advance something without knowing what it is. So a university cannot claim to advance social justice if it also impedes inquiry into the nature of justice. For if we simply assume a singular conception of justice, one that matches the predominant view, and do not allow challenge and inquiry, we are not defending truth, but dogma. More generally, the idea that the university's function is to "prepare citizens" itself presupposes free inquiry. Preparing them for what? For participation in democratic deliberation? Unchallengeable dogma is not the way to prepare for that. Living in a society of equals? Unchallengeable dogma is not the way to prepare for that. So while it's true that higher education can *assist* in the preparation of citizens

or the advancement of justice, it can only do those things by way of fostering independence of thought and rational open-mindedness that is neither relativistic/nihilistic nor dogmatic.

A right of free speech and expression protects faculty in their role as truth-seeking scholars, as educators, and as a self-governing community. The primary goal of this right in the university context is fostering a healthier climate for robust exchange of ideas among faculty, among students, and between faculty and students. “Groupthink” is not only anathema to the pursuit of truth in general, but it can also turn into bullying. Bullying is a failure to treat others with respect as equal members of the community. Saying that everyone ought to treat other members of the community with respect might be misinterpreted as some sort of “walking back” the right of free speech, but this is to miss the point. The point is that, as members of a community, we have certain *moral* obligations as to how to treat each other, and indeed these obligations *facilitate* both our pursuit of truth and our educational role, by (a) responding to arguments and positions rather than defaulting to personal insults, (b) interpreting with charity and the assumption of good faith, (c) understanding that truth is better obtained through respectful cooperative inquiry than by bullying, and modeling that behavior to students. It’s disrespectful to use slurs, and it’s disrespectful to fail to do these three things. No one at the university (actually, no one at all) should be afraid to pursue inquiry. These are ways to make sure that no one is.

Strengthening Freedom of Speech

The possible avenues for opposition to this freedom come from several sources. Most obvious is the threat of government restrictions or punishments. But perhaps more insidious is when

faculty are silenced by other faculty. Sometimes a viewpoint is sufficiently antithetical to the predominant view as to make it tempting to shut down dissent rather than engage it. Faculty members, who should know better, need to resist this temptation, if for no other reason than self-preservation. Whenever the rule is “majorities can silence unpopular minorities,” history shows that it is inevitably used against the very people who advocated it. This urge to shut down dissent can also come from student activists who confuse their passion for a cause with license to bully and silence others, or from activists outside the university entirely. A university administration may, in the face of such pressures from politicians, professors, students, or outsiders, choose to go along with the call to repress discussion, or it may choose to defend the right of free speech and expression. It should always be the latter, as an administration needs to provide the institutional framework for protecting those values that are at the core of the university’s mission. But at the same time, faculty should strive to cultivate the kind of atmosphere in which consensus is not mistaken for orthodoxy, and disagreement is welcomed, or even encouraged, provided it takes place with civility and collegiality. The stronger a faculty climate like this is, the more likely students will develop the same culture. When that’s the prevailing culture among faculty and students, it’s less attractive to an administrator to adopt a censorious approach, and easier to defend academic freedom against external threats.

Of course, the institution of tenure is meant to provide this protection, and it does, to some extent. But a contractual guarantee is a *minimal* condition. Even better would be a culture which actually embraced the value of free expression as a necessary condition for truth-seeking. A culture which embraced diversity of thought and prided itself on being a pluralistic, heterodox

community would be one which understood, and benefitted from, the way Socratic dialectic contributes to the pursuit of truth. Besides the constant push towards refining one’s view, it also helps participants keep in mind the importance of epistemic humility. Universities must, then, in order to fulfill their mission, protect freedom of expression both by observing formal procedural guarantees, and by helping foster a climate where the connection between truth-seeking and diversity is understood and valued.

I suggest that three distinct groups at a university have specific responsibilities: First, faculty: Faculty must treat other faculty respectfully, which includes respecting heterodoxy and its expression. Second, the administration: Administration must offer maximal protection of free speech, not merely through the tenure system, but by actively shielding faculty against bullying, slander, and intimidation. And third, students: Students must learn (a) to feel free expressing diverse ideas, and (b) how their free speech rights are connected to free speech rights for others, and the ways in which robust but civil exchange of ideas is critical for progress. Faculty and administrative behavior should model this. If these three groups work towards these norms, then the rights of free speech and expression will be most securely protected, and the university’s dual function as a place of scholarship and teaching will be best fulfilled.



Aeon J. Skoble is the Bartlett Chair in Free Speech and Expression and Professor in the Department of Philosophy.