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Take Back the Ivory Tower

Democracy depends on having a public capable of thinking

André da Loba for The Chronicle Review

By Alice Dreger | OCTOBER 01, 2017

Before we reach the point where we all have to check with our Diversity and Inclusion officers to find out which thoughts we are allowed to think, before we must clear with the guards of university-branding everything we want to say, before every type of scholarship that cannot obtain external funding is abandoned, before tenure is completely replaced with tenuousness, and before the icecaps melt away into the sea, let's see if we can come to some agreement about taking back the Ivory Tower.

Before I describe the sorry state "we" are in and call "us" to arms, I should disclose that I currently live outside the Ivory Tower. This situation is due primarily to an instance of fellatio to be described later. (Eyes up here.) Without a university affiliation affixed to my name, you may think of me as an outsider who has no right to weigh in on all this. But, given my experiences as a scholar who has been subject to disinvitation attempts by the left, purchasing attempts by the right, and outright censorship by my dean, I think I do. Besides, being an

academic is largely a state of mind. Which is kind of the point of this essay. And also something that will be confirmed by thousands of adjuncts who can't make rent.

Rather than spending time on one campus, I now spend time moving from one campus to another, engaging faculty, students, and administrators in the cause of academic freedom. This is partly because of what's happened to me personally, but also because I believe our democracy is going to fail if we do not have a healthy academia, one that has at its core a faculty unafraid.

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Democracy depends on having a public capable of thinking, not merely being. And the academy is the last organized place we have to teach millions of adults to doubt authority, to look things up, to weigh ideas and evidence, to argue in a nonviolent fashion, to do the hard work of *changing their own minds*. This is not work the government or religious institutions or the media is going to do. Democracy depends on a large public capable of at least occasionally being moved by principle and mind, not only tribe and gut, and a healthy academy functions as a model and fomenter of that attitude.

The academy is also the last place — besides a small handful of nonpartisan nonprofit organizations — where truly independent research can be conducted in a sustained fashion by large numbers of people. It is not difficult to look at research in agriculture, medicine, ecology, and history and see the profound contributions of the academy to contemporary life. Consider work done at West Virginia University that caught Volkswagen subverting emission testing, or the findings of various "innocence projects" in colleges of law and journalism. If we allow the scope of academic research to continue to be narrowed to fit the wants of industries and politicians, what we will have is a nation built on narrowly focused, relatively unsustainable, wasteful, even dangerous policy — in education, criminal justice, climate, health care, and many other areas that shape our lives and deaths.

Thomas Paine said famously, in *Common Sense*, "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind." It's not an exaggeration today to suggest that the cause of the academy is in a great measure the cause of all mankind.

Except one is not supposed to say "mankind" on campus anymore, and, as I've learned, saying what you're not supposed to say on campus these days can be risky.

> I have enjoyed meeting and talking with every one of the plainclothes armed guards who have come to my invited lectures to protect me and my audiences in the past few years. They have never looked as handsome as Kevin Costner, but then I don't sing as well as Whitney Houston.

Why do my hosts sometimes arrange armed guards? To use Aristotle's framing — which I realize marks me a tool of the patriarchy — the *efficient cause* is threats designed to have me disinvited and humiliated for my supposed sins. The *formal cause* is a climate in which some people, including academics, think I should be silenced because my scholarship is "dangerous."

What did I do to mark myself? I spent a year documenting the lies of activists about a group of researchers who put forth unpopular ideas about transgenderism. I have also written about transgenderism in other ways that challenge what have been positioned as the "acceptable" narratives. Thus, I stand accused of committing "structural violence" — even being responsible for physical violence against transgender people, about whose rights I care deeply.

My work has, in fact, focused on the history of the abuse of sexual minorities in science, medicine, and society. I have tried to push for the rights of sexual minorities from a consistently feminist perspective. Thus you may be surprised to hear that I have certain "lived experiences" in common with people like Charles Murray. If you have followed mainstream media portrayals of free-speech strife on campuses, you may have reasonably concluded that activists have tried to silence only white men. Only through the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) — a group that has defended my rights — will you hear about the troubles of people like me, women in women-and-gender-studies programs, and people of color in various ethnic-studies programs who have failed to swear allegiance to the latest creed.

Somehow, even in the case of a supposedly offensive email sent by Erika Christakis at Yale, the mainstream media managed to make that controversy largely about her husband, Nicholas. I guess white men make for simple characters in sound-bite "news" reports about campus oppression — villains for the left, heroes for the right. In reality, though, all over the country, I have heard from faculty members who are white women, people of color, queer folk, persons with disabilities, and people with complex "intersectional" identities who have been subject to shutdowns in their own classrooms and departmental meetings because they are allegedly guilty of not being progressive enough. Some have told me of the deployment of Title IX by students and colleagues to mark them as discriminators and abusers. Disturbingly, many faculty members have told me of cleansing their syllabi and visiting-speaker rosters to avoid causing offense.

To be clear, I have nothing against giving students a warning when we're wandering into something we know in advance may be uncomfortable. I have alerted students when they are about to see close-up video of the pudenda of a birthing woman. ("She hasn't shaved, which I realize may shock and disturb some of you.") But it is the very roughness and unpredictability of academic exchange that can lead to highly productive moments in teaching and research, and by hemming ourselves into what is the lowest common denominator of "inoffensive," we lose those opportunities. We stop ourselves from doing what could be our best work as teachers.

I am reminded of one instance 20 years ago when I assigned a text to my undergraduates without realizing, until moments before the class met, that the version I had given them was an elongated version of one I had used in past years, the newer one containing an extended "rights" defense of pedophilic sex. I arrived in my classroom queasy, only to discover that these young people had had their minds blown by being forced to really think about the complexities of human sexual development and sexual rights. The discussion that followed was not only magnificent — teaching me a lot I had apparently forgotten about what it's like to be 18 — but turned the class into a collegewide legend. I can only imagine what would happen if I assigned such a text today.

Another true story: On the day in September 2016 that I gave an invited lecture on academic freedom at Augustana College, the campus had woken up to some overnight pro-Trump sidewalk chalking. Various students with historically marginalized identities expressed feeling threatened by this, and in response, the day after my talk on the importance of academic freedom to democracy, the Augustana administration instituted "election-expression zones" to limit where political views on the election could be aired. (If I were a drug for academic freedom, the FDA would probably have to label me unsafe and ineffective.) While

Augustana's administration said that these zones did not limit speech, they sure looked like the "free speech" zones constructed by other college administrations to stop uncomfortable dialogue from breaking out.

Of course, that speech restriction at Augustana totally worked out: Trump wasn't elected, and racists and misogynists haven't been at all empowered as a result.

I don't know where George Orwell is buried, but I'm guessing it's in a free-speech zone.

Look, when I first encountered "safe spaces," I signed on. Back then it was a designation used for the offices of those of us who had been trained to be allies to LGBT students. A "safe space" sticker on my office door meant a student could know that I had been trained not to shame them and to help refer them to peer support and professional counselors. Now many students, faculty members, and administrators believe that entire campuses need to be "safe spaces" to maximally "accommodate" those from historically marginalized and oppressed groups. Just ask Bret Weinstein at Evergreen State College, who recently dared to challenge a day without white people. (But then what does he know; he's a white man.)

I think what feels particularly shocking to me in the shutdowns by campus progressives is both the historical amnesia — have they really completely forgotten McCarthyism and what motivated the Free Speech Movement of 1964? — and the apparent willingness to hand power over to university administrators, including (shudder) "risk managers." Yet in some cases, progressives seeking to stop "uncomfortable" messages and messengers have not only asked but demanded that their university administrators dictate what can be said on our campuses. Way to build power tools for the masters.

Forgive me while I reminisce about the days when I worked at a place that protected a Holocaust denier on the faculty.

This was in early 2006, when I was only about a year into my decade of being on the faculty at Northwestern University. An electrical-engineering professor named Arthur Butz had just made a statement denying the Holocaust. In response, our university president, Henry Bienen, issued a statement I saved like a prize: "There is no question that the Holocaust is a well-documented historical fact," but "we cannot take action based on the content of what Butz says regarding the Holocaust — however odious it may be — without undermining the vital principle of intellectual freedom that all academic institutions serve to protect."

In other words, the brilliance of the many depends fundamentally on the right of the one to be stupid. Reading Bienen's statement, I knew Northwestern was a place where I could do what I needed to do as a scholar and teacher. We had the right to be wrong!

And that was true. Until Northwestern's administration changed, along with the rest of academia, and I learned the hard way that I had been branded.

Trigger warning: Here comes the blowjob.

When I was on the faculty of the Medical Humanities and Bioethics Program at Northwestern's Feinberg School of Medicine, we put out a high-gloss, high-quality publication called *Atrium*. Each issue focused on a theme in the medical humanities — unmentionables; haunting; power. I often described *Atrium* as a "*tapas* journal" because it contained relatively short essays, articles, and graphic art that explored rare and ordinary experiences in health care. We rotated who edited a given issue and, for the Winter 2014 issue, it was my turn. *Atrium*'s editor in chief suggested the theme of "Bad Girls." We did the usual thing — soliciting proposals — and we got back the usual marvelous array from medical humanists, bioethicists, nurses,

doctors, cartoonists, and patients. Of the 30-some offerings on abortion, caregiving, and the like, I could choose only about a dozen to put through peer editing, revision, and publication.

One article I chose was a first-person essay by the cultural anthropologist and disability-studies scholar Bill Peace, of Syracuse University. Bill told what happened in a rehabilitation hospital in 1978 when he became paralyzed at the age of 18. Long story short, while physicians refused to engage young Bill's questions about his sexual function, a nurse with whom Bill had developed a friendship gave him oral sex to assure him that he could still look forward to a good sex life.

Bill Peace's story wasn't something you'd find in *Playboy,* unless I've missed the issues with stories in which foreplay consists of young men crying over bladder incontinence. Bill wasn't telling his history to titillate or to advocate for sex between medical professionals and patients, but rather to document "the wild west" of 1970s rehab hospitals and to question whether we take seriously the sexual lives of persons with disabilities. Even as I went with Bill's cheeky title, "Head Nurses," it never occurred to me that this essay was going to cause my dean, Eric Neilson, to declare that we might have violated a "branding agreement" the medical school had made with the university-affiliated hospital corporation and to insist that we pull Bill's published article.

But it did. Neilson couldn't call back the already mailed 3,000 paper copies, but he did insist Bill's essay come offline.

Awkward timing for yours truly. I had a book coming out on academic freedom, *Galileo's Middle Finger*, a book in which I called on academics to stand against attempts to silence "dangerous" scholarship. Neilson's censorship was bad, but what made it much worse was that he also insisted that our program thereafter

subject *Atrium* to a new "editorial committee" consisting of people from the PR department and his office. This new (censorship) committee would vet (censor) themes, proposals, and content.

If we are sober about all this, which I have occasionally been, we must recognize that "university brand" is at best an oxymoron. A university is supposed to allow for the whole universe of ideas — to host an unpredictable plurality. A brand is at its essence a singular message, any departure from which subverts. Yet, probably while we were all busy grading, we've all been branded. Our universities' dull Latin mottos — *lux, veritas,* et al. — have all now been effectively replaced by short English marketing phrases developed by external consultants. Driven to Discover. We Will. Fulfilling the Promise. These expensive little slogans are, to a one, trademarked. They are also — I am not making this up — specifically tied to computer-graphics codes that provide the exact shade of each school's colors. Because using the wrong shade of maize or purple on a football-stadium seat cushion could, apparently, be disastrous. Each university now has a dedicated webpage about its "brand" and "brand strategy." There reside the very-not-postmodern rules about how you may represent your institution's catchphrase, seal, and mascot. As one bitter university administrator summed it up to me, "You can rape our women and children, but you can't use our logo."

Faculty members could just ignore this branding stuff, but to do so would be to ostrich ourselves about the Death Star this all represents, namely the corporatization of academia — corporatization which is perfectly happy to take demands to shut down ideas and dialogues that might offend somebody.

"Publish or perish" — those were the days, my friend! Those were the days before we went fully corporate. Today, if we look at the scene honestly, university faculty members are not cloistered scholars but car salesmen judged primarily by our monthly sales, i.e., external funding. (When we asked our 16-year-old son, raised by two academic parents, what he thought the March for Science was primarily

about for scientists, he answered, "Funding." The mouths of babes.) Whether the "always right" customers are our students, potential donors, or trustees is an open question, but whatever the answer, we can't afford even one bad sales day. Add to this money-centered, corporatized system the decimation of tenure, and what you end up with is an industrialized machine in which the risk managers take maximal advantage of our job insecurity.

As we find ourselves caught in this system that is increasingly about corporate mission and financial empire-building, the collapse of job security and the requirement to bring in the money are changing how we function as scholars, teachers, and administrators. What does it mean that we all know we're now working in places where misconduct by researchers and coaches is judged not by its awfulness, but by how the university's bottom line might best be protected? This is all kind of gross, no?

Perhaps it should not surprise us that incursions from the right are now infecting our self-inflicted wounds. In places like North Carolina, Republican politicians have moved to shut down programs whose politics they dislike. In places like Wisconsin, Republicans are effectively retiring tenure. Various conservative philanthropists are moving in, as leftists historically had done, to offer large sums for the creation of centers and professorships that push their politics. One colleague told me of an attempt by a conservative foundation to create a center for academic freedom at his university, which might have been OK if the donation hadn't come with instructions about what kind of research it should do. I recently declined an offer from FIRE to become one of their John Templeton Foundation-funded scholars. If you're not familiar with the Templeton foundation, it has a history of promoting creationism; although FIRE assured me that I would not be bound by the funding source, I felt I had to say no, as I know how funding subtly influences work. (I only just found out that Templeton is supporting the FIRE faculty conference at which I'll be giving the keynote; I'll donate my honorarium to a nonprofit organization.)

By the way, I may look so pure and noble, but I am fully aware that I can make all these principled stances because I'm married to a university administrator with a steady gig and because I am good at maintaining a fantasy wherein eventually my integrity pays off big.

So where the hell do we go from here? After our son's cynical-realist take on the March for Science, and after talking with a lot of thoughtful academics, here's my proposal: We need to consider marching for intellectual humility. If we must march and chant anything in unison, how about this: We are uncertain! We are uncertain!

Because at the basis, what is supposed to make us different — what makes us most purposeful and useful — is knowing that we don't know everything, knowing that we could be very incorrect — perhaps as incorrect as some very smart people before us have been. What's been so wrong with the shout-downs from the left, and the shutdowns from the right, and the whole nightmare of university blanding — uh, I mean, branding — is the narrowing and cementing of what counts as true — the utter lack of intellectual humility. (She said, with certainty.) If we are going to take back the Ivory Tower — something I really think we need to do as much for our fellow persons as for ourselves — we need to remember that the reason we come together in universities, besides the hope of health insurance, is because it's clear that one person alone can't figure out anything all that important.

So, let us now come together over more than parking. Let us take back the deep work of our academic governance from our administrations. Let us fix, or at least stem the tide, of the job-security problem.

Let us require our students to read difficult work and learn to respond to uncomfortable chalk by chalking back. Teach them histories of censorship and blacklisting on the right and the left. Require them to reflect upon their (and our) uncertainty. Teach reliable methodologies, not infallible ideologies. Let us always

be implicitly asking what one graduate professor explicitly asked me when I was being an intellectually recalcitrant pig: If you haven't changed your mind lately, how do you know it's working?

And let us do what many of us as scholars, in the rush to succeed, haven't been doing very well: Let us fact-check our own work before we publish it. Resist tribalism. Punish one another only for the mortal sin of making crap up. Not confuse what is fundable with what is valuable. And consider wearing our robes and our hoods more proudly more often, to remind ourselves that, while we all are complex tangles of minds, selves, and cultures, we may also as academics rise to be part of something quite profound and very, very good.

Alice Dreger is a historian of medicine and science and the author of Galileo's Middle Finger. *She will deliver the keynote at FIRE's faculty conference in October, in Dallas.*

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