

opinions

academic freedom

On Wednesday, November 4th, Dalhousie's proposed Statement on Discriminatory Harassment was presented in a public forum in the Green Room. During the discussion which followed, the most debated point was that of the notion of academic freedom. Curiously, for some people the perception has been formed that this policy stands in opposition to it. Some fear that respect and protection of the rights of traditionally under-represented groups to play a full role in the university is irreconcilable with the freedom to think and discuss and study everything that a university community must. This perception is not only based upon a false opposition - protection of rights and academic freedoms are not mutually exclusive - it is also based on an ignorance of the fact that respect for all humans is a precursor to the very existence of academic freedom.

Interestingly, those led to fear this policy are also led to disregard the primacy which it accords to academic freedom. The Statement begins by declaring that "Freedom of inquiry and of expression are essential freedoms in a university and conflicting ideas are a vital feature of university life." If anything, this can only strengthen respect for our academic ideals.

The example of P. Rushton was tossed back and forth. Forgetting for a moment that academics everywhere seriously question the theoretical

framework and methodologies supporting Rushton's work - questioning even its "academic" nature - it remains to be seen to what degree the concept of freedom can be applied to his research. Even if an abstraction could be made of the psychological and social damage that this work does to huge groups of individuals, one has to ask in what context Rushton can be considered to be free. A human being has dedicated his life's work to studying other humans, and is somehow prevented from seeing them in their complete humanity. Something has blinkered him, blinding him to considerations that are the underpinnings of all scientific and humanistic research. This leaves the results of his work skewed and useless when applied to a real context.

The proposed Statement on Discriminatory Harassment is Dalhousie's effort to do something about the blindnesses we have internalized in our own social context, to keep them from self-replicating as all forms of abuse are observed to do. What would happen if Rushton were a professor at Dalhousie and complaints were made by individuals who felt his work discriminated against them and kept them from being empowered to express responsibly their own views and opinions? This policy would allow for a group of human beings with training in the matters of discrimination and human relation-

ships to sit down and hear both sides of the complaint. These people would then consider the best actions for the community to take in order to respond both to the exclusionary damage done to any person who feels they have been the victim of discriminatory harassment, and to protect academic freedom and quality in the analytic approaches we take to information. In the end, this only serves to strengthen our commitment to academic freedom for all, to academic excellence, and to leadership as an academic community.

Consideration of this proposed Statement must also take into account the provision for emphasis on "education as the basic element of a

freedom to think and discuss

non-discriminatory atmosphere." An active programme of community education on issues surrounding harassment and all the forms it takes will leave Dalhousie with people better educated about themselves, about their own culture, and about the people who form with them a community. In this way, many harassing situations will simply be avoided. In a university environment, it remains difficult to advance a serious argument in opposition to education.

In end analysis, confusion arises in the discussion of all of these issues because we actually see two different contexts coming together: one set of ideas developed around the concept of academic freedom, and a whole other complex of ideas around what constitutes harassment. The latter of these two also serves as touching stone for passage into all other contexts related to the human experi-

ence. This is unfortunate since the human mind - especially one trained in one-variable objectivity - has difficulty holding onto two contexts at once, let alone observing their dynamic interaction. Nonetheless, the matters being discussed simply do not occur in a vacuum. What is being discussed is people, and whether or not everyone is allowed and indeed encouraged to achieve complete academic expression and enlightenment. We can observe that there are aspects of our society and of our own Dalhousie community which tend to work against this, and we can try to do something about it.

The proposed Statement on Discriminatory Harassment provides a mechanism for a dynamic response to harassment and its dehumanizing effects. Yes, we may just see that a professor is not able to present uncritically work based on a perception of humans as objects, missing the point of the academic experience altogether. We might see theories claiming some form of supremacy analysed critically instead of presented as a kind of absolute academic truth. We might see the libraries increasing their holdings in areas of essential information about more than one culture, about more than one view of gender relations. We might end up having more respect for ourselves and each other as a community. We might indeed see a humanistic, cornucopian, even Rabelaisian approach to knowledge which, instead of reacting xenophobically to the unknown, seeks actively to understand it. It must of course be argued that this is the kind of approach needed for Dalhousie to remain contemporary and hopefully at the front of academic research done at this polyphonic end of the 20th century.

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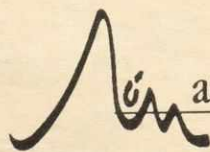


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