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”Academic Freedom” and Us

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Abstract

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“Academic freedom” might be broadly defined as meaning the freedom of inquiry and the expression of opinion in any scholastic endeavor which seeks the truths of science and society. It is a precept which has been the very foundation of the growth of the university system in Western cultures ever since the flowering of Humanism in the 16th century.

This fundamental tenet of higher education has been attacked during the past few years by those who feel it provides protection for the anathema of Communist doctrine to permeate the American educational system. In front page and feature story we have read of “loyalty oaths” and investigations of college faculties, and also of the vigorous reaction on the part of those who feel these methods infringe upon the basic rights of teacher or researcher.

Emerging from all this debate and discussion are many clear-cut opinions on the general health and purposes of American education. It will be our interest here to pull together these opinions into a coherent picture of the pros and cons of academic freedom on a national scale, and finally to point out just where and how this all applies to the Iowa State campus.

Although our main interest is in the problem as it relates to the universities, its impact is felt in the entire educational system, government security and diplomatic policies, and nearly all aspects of American life. Actually, “academic freedom” cannot be divorced from the total picture of “intellectual freedom,” and as we shall see, our discussion will ultimately require us to deal with this broader aspect.

Academic Freedom Challenged

Now it is nothing new for American universities to be sharply criticized. Any institution which encourages a diversity of opinions must expect, and indeed welcome, rejoinders to those opinions. As a matter of fact, the public has always regarded college activities at all levels with a

chary eye, and charges of Communist infiltration merely constitute the most urgent problem with which educators have recently had to deal.

This latest problem is not a new one either. The October Revolution had scarcely ended before the universities began to be suspected of harboring sympathizers with it. One of the first attacks was launched against — you guessed it — Harvard. In 1921 a prominent alumnus openly accused the University of fostering an atmosphere of “radicalism, socialism, and Bolshevism.”

The retired president, Dr. Charles W. Eliot, quickly rose to the defense, and in his reply set the keynote for the universities' stand on the issue to the present day:

“There is no surer way to strengthen and spread a mistaken doctrine than to suppress it by any kind of force or pressure. Suppression by force should be confined to treasonable, seditious, or otherwise dangerous performances.”

The basic controversy is unchanged since this beginning, being only intensified by events in the intervening years. The pros and cons in the present debate divide pretty clearly between those who place the value of academic or intellectual freedom above the consequences of doubtful practices which would inhibit it, and those who feel the present ideological struggle demands definite restrictions.

Why Restriction

Those who would place qualifications on the principle of academic freedom reason this way: Academic freedom carries with it not only the privilege of expression, but also the responsibility for voicing objective and informed opinions. This is impossible if one is a Communist or sympathizer, since one here is bound to blindly uphold and spread the party doctrine. In order to protect the maturing minds of American youth from subversive teachings, every means must be taken to ferret out and remove any suspects in university faculties.

The Case Against Suppression

Arrayed on the other side of the question are many prominent educators. Within the past year two statements

have been made that merit attention as clear enunciations of the value of broad academic freedom. One was by Dr. James B. Conant, past president of Harvard University:

“As to the charge that some professors hold unpopular opinions, the answer is, of course, that they do. It would be a sad day for the United States if the tradition to dissent were driven out of the universities. It is the freedom to disagree, to quarrel with authority on intellectual matters, that has made this nation what it is today.”

The other was given in an address by Grayson Kirk, president of Columbia University:

“When we talk . . . about academic freedom or intellectual freedom, we do not do so because academic people have a specially privileged position. We do so because no university can flourish except in an atmosphere which protects the fullest freedom of inquiry When we become afraid to deal with honest differences of opinion among loyal citizens, we not only undermine the basis upon which all universities must operate, we endanger the future of our republic.”

There are countless other arguments, but in sum, those who uphold broad academic freedom look at the long-range dangers of intolerance and restriction to the intellectual fiber of America, while those who oppose it concentrate on the immediate menace of Communism and the means of uprooting every trace of it from the educational system.

However sincere the latter group is in its views, the inquisition methods which implement this stand are unfortunate. These are short-term measures designed to protect the security of a country engaging in open war. Since our struggle with Russia appears to be a long-range ideological proposition, such short-sighted methods constitute a real danger to ultimately gaining the upper hand.

Here, then, is the paradox and tragedy which characterize the McCarthy techniques; that in seeking to combat an apparent disease, we have encouraged another and far more fatal one: the cancer of intellectual apathy and intolerance which would undermine the basic tenets of American democracy and bring ultimate ruin.

If this is the case, then it is against this greater evil that we should primarily be on our guard. And this is where we come in, for though the academic freedom hassle has centered primarily on the liberal arts schools rather than technical schools like I. S. C., there are certain aspects of campus life here which evidence the faint beginnings of the broader danger.

The Communist Danger

First a word about the Communism question. Speaking as a student, I think most of us lean toward the fullest academic freedom possible. We aren't as impressionable and naive as some critics would make us out to be. Many of us would be genuinely interested in views which reflect the Communist background, its tactics and objectives, for how else can you defeat an enemy except that you know his strengths and weaknesses?

And to those who fear we will fall for Communism, I would answer that American democracy, with its high standard of living and boundless opportunities, has been too good to us to chuck it overboard for a despotic and ruthless alternative. We can see through the Commies' line, and for those of us who can't, it is far better that they be out in the open where we can hope to win them back by free discussion, than to have them driven into secret subversive societies where we cannot pierce their embittered shells. "The best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market," stated Mr. Justice Holmes. In such a situation, the deceptions of Communism aren't worth a hill of beans.

Iowa State's Problem

The real tragedy, though, is that in today's atmosphere of suspicion, we hesitate to give full play to our social and intellectual interests. Someone has recently commented on the lack of intellectual vigor on American campuses, and if one looks beneath the welter of Veishea, Homecoming, councils, boards, and other activities, there is ample evidence of this lethargy on our campus.

Now the above activities are an integral and necessary part of life at I.S.C., but I think we tend to overemphasize them to the detriment of sounder and more inventive intellectual enterprises. For instance, Sketch, the only publication the students have for original and creative thought, had to battle tremendous apathy in order to get reinstated on campus two year ago.

Again, how many of us are interested enough in world understanding and the views of other peoples to participate in such groups as Cosmopolitan Club or the United World Federalists? Not only are we caught up in the more socially-accepted activities, but I have a suspicion that we are afraid to enlarge our horizons through such groups because people might think we were a bit radical or even faintly "pink."

Besides the above activities, three others — Coffee Forum, Books and Cokes, and Philosophy Forum — come to my mind as meriting more active student support and participation. If we fail to use these means for debating controversial and intellectual problems, it will be a sure sign that we are beginning to fall victims to the fatal cancers of fear and complacency.

The other evening I dropped in on a Social Science Seminar in which Dr. Norman Graebner was speaking on the U. S. foreign policy in the Far East. In the ensuing question-and-answer period, both he and his audience freely and vigorously debated our methods and intents in dealing with Chiang Kai-Chek and Communist China. It was a refreshing example of the freedom of inquiry and opinion in its fullest expression on this campus.

The issue of academic freedom is nothing one can get up and wave banners about. It requires, rather, the recognition of the subtle dangers of an atmosphere of intellectual suspicion and apathy to the larger realm of intellectual freedom and American democracy. Although the primary debate on academic freedom has focussed on the university faculties, it is on the students that the ultimate effects are felt, and it is with vigor and foresight that we must respond.

—Gordon Shepherd, *Sci. Sr.*