

## OPINION

# Review of universities should not be influenced by misperceptions

*By: Jim Clark*

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The planned review of Manitoba universities is likely to be coloured by prior impressions of post-secondary institutions held by the public and politicians. Unfortunately, too many people now judge universities by rare but highly visible events on campuses, namely demonstrations against certain speakers and even efforts to interrupt their presentations.

Such episodes of "deplatforming" have given rise in some minds to the idea that universities promote an activist, socialist, and even Marxist agenda, with conservative views being suppressed by a majority of "woke" students, a cult of social justice warriors (SJWs).

These views have been promoted by organizations critical of universities and taken up by conservative politicians. Both Premier Rob Ford in Ontario and President Donald Trump in the United States have adopted policies mandating free speech on campus to squelch what they see as institutions under siege by massive assaults on free expression.

As someone who has worked in various universities across Canada for more than four decades, I believe these characterizations do not describe the dominant life in academia. The vast majority of departments, professors and students engage in mainstream teaching and research functions. They spend time creating and consuming knowledge, not in activism nor in politics. My impression is confirmed by much evidence on the issue of free speech in universities.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) in the U.S. has a database of occasions when deplatforming has occurred. There have been 30 to 40 episodes per year; although too many, this is a minuscule number relative to the thousands of universities and even more thousands of professors and millions of students across the U.S.

The same is true of Canada: events are rare, but newsworthy and widely distributed. "Speaker not interrupted" is a boring headline.

Moreover, most such events involve a few speakers who appear deliberately provocative, such as Milo Yiannopoulos, who, for example, has advertised a speaking tour by using a derogatory term for gays, perhaps with the intention of provoking a heated response.

Consistent with the notion that such episodes are rare, surveys of university students show that very few would themselves disrupt someone presenting an offensive view, and many believe that such disruption is never appropriate.

Finally, if universities are indoctrinating students against the value of free speech, they are certainly doing a poor job. Surveys continue to show university graduates support free speech more than the general population does, and by a considerable margin.

This is not to deny tensions in universities and broader society over competing rights, such as free speech and freedom from harm. Determining the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable speech is a challenge; even the Canadian Civil Liberties Association takes issue with Canada's laws on hate speech, given its subjective nature.

Canadians also vary in how much they value avoiding harm to others relative to free speech.

There are also tensions within universities regarding their appropriate role. Most view standard teaching and research as their proper function, but a vocal minority of professors and students sees consciousness-raising and activism as legitimate roles. This has given rise to disruptions of "unacceptable" speakers and misleading impressions about universities as a whole.

Despite contrary views, the majority of professors and students are not more public, largely because the demands of teaching and research are numerous, and there are more satisfying ways to spend time and energy than politics. But silence may have enabled minor elements within universities to taint the institutions' image in the wider community.

The planned provincial review is somewhat controversial, but whatever the fuzzy boundary between guiding and interfering in universities, any review and subsequent changes should not be influenced by false impressions about what is happening on our campuses.

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