

Comments on academic freedom

A submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

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Personal background

I have been studying the treatment of dissent in academia — and elsewhere — for nearly 30 years. My earliest publication in the area, “The scientific straightjacket,” appeared in 1981, and since then I’ve written books and numerous articles on dissent. Most of my writings are available on my website: see especially <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/supp.html>.

I was president of Whistleblowers Australia 1996-1999 and since then have continued to serve on the national committee, currently as a vice-president. I edit Whistleblowers Australia’s newsletter *The Whistle*, available at http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/contacts/au_wba/. I maintain a large website with materials on suppression of dissent and whistleblowing, at <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/>. A wide range of individuals regularly consult me about matters concerning dissent, including hundreds of academics over the years.

As a result of these experiences, I’ve developed a distinctive perspective on dissent. You can see this by reading my publications. See especially:

- “Energising dissent,” <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/07dissent.html>
- “Boomerangs of academic freedom,” <http://www.cust.educ.ubc.ca/workplace/issue6p2/steele.html>
- “Illusions of whistleblower protection,” <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/03utslr.html>
- *The Whistleblower’s Handbook*, <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/99wh.html>
- *Suppression Stories*, <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/documents/ss/>
- *Intellectual Suppression*, <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/86is/>

Procedures

Better procedures for handling problems are not the answer. Formal protections and processes can be valuable, but too often become the focus of attention to the detriment of other more effective approaches. Furthermore, in many cases official channels give only an illusion of protection. See “Illusions of whistleblower protection.”

Conditions

Organisational and cultural conditions make a big difference to intellectual freedom. For example, if there are many employment opportunities, academics will feel more confident in speaking out — they can go elsewhere if necessary. If there are several different grant bodies, with different value systems, there’s more opportunity for unorthodox scholars to find support. If the workplace is egalitarian rather than hierarchical, expressing challenging views is usually easier, as there will be less fear of reprisals from powerful managers and gatekeepers. If workloads are not excessive and promotion systems recognise unconventional outputs, there will be more time for

community service and more incentive to step outside professional fences. If there is a culture of vigorous discussion on sensitive issues, it is far easier to join in.

Bringing about change in organisational and cultural conditions is challenging, to say the least, given the heavy investments in current ways of doing things. This is an important but not an easy road to greater academic freedom.

Support systems

Personal support makes an enormous difference to dissenters and to those thinking of challenging conventional wisdom in some way. Networks, groups, associations and wise advisers make it far easier to exercise freedom. The best support systems are built around committed individuals. Funding is less important than commonality of purpose. However, it is not obvious how best to foster support systems.

Skills and practice

Knowing how to speak out and be effective, knowing about the possibility of reprisals and how to deal with them, knowing how organisations operate and how to negotiate within them, knowing where to find information and who to consult — these and other skills make an enormous difference. Developing practical skills in exercising academic freedom is a good way to expand the scope of that freedom. This, in my view, is where it is relatively easy to make improvements.

Learning skills is important to both students and academics — and to many outside higher education. There is an amazing diversity and complexity of issues involving teaching, personal relationships, attitudes and the like that formal procedures are ill-equipped to handle and for which knowledge and skills can make a huge difference.

Practical materials do not have a high status among academics: high theory is more widely respected. For this reason, few scholars have specialised in development of skills for exercising academic freedom. Nonetheless, there is quite a bit of useful material available.

Skills need to be practised. That means exercising academic freedom regularly.



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