

Statement on Academic Freedom

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Academic freedom has been called “a *sine qua non* of the university’s mission.”ⁱ UNESCO defines universities as “communities of scholars preserving, disseminating and expressing freely their opinions on traditional knowledge and culture, and pursuing new knowledge without constriction by prescribed doctrines.”ⁱⁱ

Thompson Rivers University recognizes and upholds Indigenous perspectives regarding academic freedom. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples vary in their knowledge systems, but there are some universal beliefs regarding the production and sharing of knowledge. Indigenous elders have said that Professors have a responsibility to search for the truth, and be protected while doing so, provided that they do it with respect, kindness, and honesty.ⁱⁱⁱ One of the frameworks developed by Indigenous academics as a guide to research is called “the 4 R’s of Indigenous research”: respect, responsibility, relevance, and reciprocity.^{iv} Indigenous scholars view truth as being subjective and based on a diversity of experiences. John Borrows, a Chippewa legal scholar, argues that a better understanding of truth evolves with the interplay of diverse truths through dialogue and respectful debate.^v

Academic freedom is the freedom to undertake inquiry in research, teach, publish, and to present in the public forum in a spirit of openness and mutual respect.^{vi} The goal is to produce new knowledge, advance a field of research or public discussion, and promote understanding both within the university community and beyond it.^{vii} The advancement of knowledge and understanding through free inquiry, guided by rationality and civility, is vital to the open and free discussion that is the lifeblood of society. In that way, free inquiry benefits the university community and society at large.

Academic freedom thus comprises three aspects:^{viii}

1. Research and teaching that furthers knowledge and understanding.
2. Adhering to the ethical and methodological standards of one’s discipline.
3. Participation in collegial or shared governance to ensure that decisions affecting academic life in the university are based on scholarly expertise.

In what follows, we expand the discussion on these three elements.

1. Furthering knowledge and understanding

The pursuit of knowledge and truth requires free inquiry, unhindered by whether it involves ideas that may run counter to the beliefs or interests of some members of the community or the society at large. Academic freedom includes the right to criticize ideas, norms, and existing social institutions. It consists of the right to publish or disseminate one’s research through peer-reviewed scholarly publications, the classroom or online, as well as public forums, such as news and social media. It also includes the freedom to choose one’s research area and the freedom to determine the content and pedagogical methods of one’s courses within the parameters established for those courses and programs. Scholars and teachers should be free to engage in research, publication, and public discussion without fear of censorship, reprisal, harassment, or coercion.^{ix} Ideologies, politics, pressure from the public, profits, and religious doctrines must not inhibit nor dictate the inquiry for new knowledge.^x The funding of academic research, likewise, must respect the

freedom to investigate areas of inquiry and to disseminate results in accordance with professional, scholarly norms and without fear of constraint, coercion, or reprisal.

Expertise within a field confers a particular authority on a scholar's views and is protected by academic freedom. Academics also have the freedom to pursue scholarly inquiry outside of the area in which they have expertise to foster interdisciplinary research, expanding the boundaries of scientific inquiry and discovery. However, the authority conferred by expertise within one area is not necessarily transferable to another area of inquiry.

Scholars should be free to discuss research and controversial topics within the course content without fear of retaliation or censorship. Teaching must be open to rational discussion and open to differing viewpoints to instill independence of mind in students.^{xi} Academic freedom in teaching involves the reasoned discussion of matters directly relevant to the course subject, under the guidance of a faculty member, and in an atmosphere of civility, mutual respect, openness, and inclusiveness. Disagreements about matters of fact, values, or questions of method naturally happen but should not degenerate into personal antagonism and insults.^{xii} Faculty have a responsibility to protect the academic freedom of students who want to challenge ideas based on knowledge gained, but also to ensure that discussions are conducted respectfully.^{xiii}

Academic freedom applies to all scholars coming from various backgrounds concerning culture, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender expression, religion, and political affiliations. A free and open discussion that aims at furthering knowledge and understanding must be open to a diversity of voices and points of view, particularly points of view that have historically been underrepresented or excluded. Reasoned discussion involves a willingness to be persuaded by the best evidence and most compelling arguments. It must be respectful of differing points of view and the persons who express them and must not exclude voices that call into question received wisdom and point the way to expanding knowledge and understanding. Abusive speech and rants, on the contrary, are harmful to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding; such attitudes close off respectful discussion and possible sources of truth. Abusive speech is not protected by academic freedom.^{xiv}

Within the Haudenosaunee, the concept of Ganigonhi:oh, "the good mind" illustrates an ethical responsibility to use one's mind in a way that balances reason and passion, recognizing that both are important. The "good way" ideal asks us to respect the inherent dignity of all, balancing the desires and needs of the individual and the community.^{xv} Tkemlups te Secwepemc, the host Nation for TRU, has a word that summarizes similar teachings: Knucwetwecw, which means to help each other to cooperate.^{xvi}

Consideration for differing points of view and opinions expressed by scholars does not imply agreement. It means only a commitment to be open to debate and to respect persons in their dignity as human beings. In keeping with this, points of view that discriminate against particular identifiable groups are not entitled to the protection of academic freedom and can be excluded legitimately from university forums, such as the classroom or public lectures.

2. Methodological and ethical norms

As long as the method to understand and further knowledge is sound, scholars have the academic freedom to continue the inquiry. Proper methods are the conventional deductive or inductive approaches to seeking the truth. Also protected are the Indigenous ways of knowledge creation such as those of the general Indigenous framework, western methods within an Indigenous context, community-based participatory research, storytelling, and culture-specific methods.^{xvii} Innovations in methodological approaches to

understanding the world and furthering knowledge, and which are in contrast to conventional approaches, are protected under academic freedom.

Promoting views that experts have widely discredited, for which there is no credible theory or evidence, does not count as furthering knowledge and understanding and is not protected by academic freedom. For example, promoting opinions that humans are not the cause of climate change is contrary to the best available evidence. Denying the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission about the cultural genocide and horrific harms done to Indigenous children in residential boarding schools causes further damage towards reconciliation and understanding.^{xviii} When university faculty promote contrary views such as these, without evidence, in the classroom, in publications, press, or social media, this calls academic inquiry into disrepute.

The Collective Agreement between Thompson Rivers University and the TRU Faculty Association (TRUFA) reads in part: “Academic freedom carries the duty to use that freedom in a manner consistent with the scholarly obligation to base research and teaching on an honest search for knowledge.” Honest inquiry for new knowledge requires that research and scholarship be conducted with integrity and following the highest research standards.^{xix}

TRU’s policy ED15-2: Integrity of Research and Scholarship encourages and guides researchers to maintain the highest research standards. It describes the responsibilities of researchers, the importance of ethics approvals to conduct research, conflict of interest issues, and research misconduct. The policy also encourages researchers to share their data used in scholarly journal publications.^{xx}

Many areas of academic inquiry are the subject of vigorous debate and disagreement. Indeed, institutions of higher learning are precisely where controversial views can and should be debated. However, views that tend to reduce rather than increase the open participation of diverse groups in public life; undermine rather than enhance the dissemination of knowledge and facts; reduce rather than increase the equality of opportunity and equality of dignity of all people; or, which make claims unsupported by evidence in their own or any other discipline, and are unsupported by the sound methodology, do not fall under the protection of academic freedom. Controversy has no value for its own sake; it has value only as a means to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

3. University governance

The pursuit of knowledge and understanding is of necessity shaped by policies and actions undertaken by the university. It follows that scholars have a responsibility to participate in their university governance, especially concerning academic matters. Consequently, academic freedom includes the freedom to comment on, criticize and advise on matters pertaining to research and teaching at the university in particular, and on governance generally, and to do so without fear of censure or reprisal. Participation includes matters such as the vision of the university and its key goals and areas of emphasis; the institutional arrangements required to fulfill this vision; course and program content; matters of pedagogy; and matters of university governance. The debate on such questions benefits from faculty members bringing their particular expertise to bear.

Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are distinct but are important to each other. Institutional autonomy refers to the freedoms of the institution as a whole to manage itself to carry out its mission. In contrast academic freedom refers to the freedom of faculty within the institution to do their academic work. Both of these freedoms need to be protected.^{xxi} Evidence indicates that universities that are independent of the influence of non-academic players and decision-makers score high in freedom to research and teach.^{xxii}

The protection and promotion of institutional autonomy thus protects and promotes academic freedom as well.^{xxiii}

4. Free speech and academic freedom

Free speech and academic freedom are related but distinct concepts.^{xxiv} Free speech is the right of citizens in a free and democratic society to express views without fear of legal penalties. Free expression and debate are essential in a democratic society; the citizenry must consider differing points of view and proposals for the country's governance. Academic freedom is integral to higher education goals: the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. The protections provided by academic freedom apply only to research (including publication) and teaching pursuits within the purview of higher education goals and discussions concerning matters of university governance. Free speech, on the other hand, operates in the wider sphere of public discourse.

Free speech rights are not absolute;^{xxv} free speech is constrained by laws prohibiting libel, slander, discrimination and hate speech, among other things. Speech within the university context is governed by norms of civility and mutual respect essential to the furtherance of scholarly inquiry. Because faculty speech is privileged and carries authority, it also carries responsibility, particularly towards vulnerable groups of people.

5. Why academic freedom matters^{xxvi}

Academics have been dismissed from their positions, and even imprisoned, for putting forward views contrary to the ideas of a ruling group. When power and ideology triumph over free inquiry, citizens are disempowered and ignorance prevails. It was to guard against this that norms of university autonomy and academic freedom were instituted.

The struggle for academic freedom goes back at least as far as 1799, when the philosopher J. G. Fichte was dismissed from his post as Full Professor at the University of Jena (Germany) for publishing his view that the only God we can know is “the living and efficaciously acting moral order.” He was dismissed not because his methods and arguments were unsound; his argumentation followed the most rigorous norms of his discipline. He was fired because the authorities disagreed with his conclusion. This is but one example of why academics have striven to replace arbitrary power with reasoned debate as a means of adjudicating academic disputes.

Universities are communities of scholars and students in the pursuit of knowledge. Academic freedom is designed to protect that pursuit. In the absence of academic freedom, knowledge suffers, and when knowledge suffers, so do all of us who strive to base our decisions, both personal and political, on the best available knowledge and information. Thus, academic freedom matters because it forms the essential foundation upon which a university rests and is crucial to informed debate.

6. The status of this statement on academic freedom

There is no single perspective on a matter as complex as academic freedom. The members of the committee who drafted this document engaged in research, consultation, debate, and reflection, but we are mindful of the limitations of our knowledge and experience. In accordance with the norms of academic inquiry and debate, the present statement on academic freedom is meant to be a living document, subject to ongoing inquiry and revision. It is intended as a guide to debate, not as the last word on the subject.

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- ⁱ “Sine qua non” means absolutely essential. Shannon Dea, “Three ways professors can support academic freedom as we head back to school,” *University Affairs* 3 September 2019; <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/dispatches-academic-freedom/three-ways-professors-can-support-academic-freedom-as-we-head-back-to-school/>; accessed 25 January 2020.
- ⁱⁱ UNESCO Recommendation concerning the status of higher-education personnel, 11 November 1997, III. 4; http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13144&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
- ⁱⁱⁱ Newhouse, D., (2018) DEBWEWIN: To speak the truth NISHNABEK DE’BWEWIN: Telling our truths https://academicmatters.ca/assets/AcademicMatters_Fall2018.pdf
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- ^v Newhouse, D., (2018) DEBWEWIN: To speak the truth NISHNABEK DE’BWEWIN: Telling our truths Academic Matters, https://academicmatters.ca/assets/AcademicMatters_Fall2018.pdf
- ^{vi} For a literature review on Academic Freedom in Canada see: Hogan, B.E. and Trotter, L.D., “Academic freedom in Canadian higher education: Universities, colleges, and institutes were not created equal,” *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 43(2) (2013): 68-84.
- ^{vii} Ridchard C. Atkinson, "Academic freedom and the research university," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 148, no. 2 (2004): 195-204.
- ^{viii} See Dea, op. cit.
- ^{ix} Judith Butler “The Criminalization of Knowledge,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 27, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Criminalization-of/243501>
- ^x Richard T. De George, "Ethics, academic freedom and academic tenure." *Journal of Academic Ethics* 1, no. 1 (2003): 11-25.
- ^{xi} Atkinson op. cit.
- ^{xii} For more information on faculty rights in the classroom see Aaron Nisenson, "Faculty Rights in the Classroom," *Academe* 103, no. 5 (2017): 10.
- ^{xiii} De George. op. cit.
- ^{xiv} Garry, Olson, “The Limits of Academic Freedom” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 December, 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Limits-of-Academic-Freedom/49354>
- ^{xv} See Newhouse, op. cit.
- ^{xvi} Ignace, M. & Ignace, R. (2017). *Secwepemc people, land and laws: Yeir7 re stsqeys-kucw*. Montreal & Kingston On: McGill-Queens University Press.
- ^{xvii} Dawson, A. S., Toombs, E., & Mushquash, C. J. (2017). Indigenous research methods: *A systematic review*. *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 8(2).
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- ^{xx} See: https://www.tru.ca/_shared/assets/Integrity_in_Research_and_Scholarship5669.pdf
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- ^{xxiv} Robert Mark Simpson, "The Relation Between Academic Freedom and Free Speech." *Ethics: an international journal of social, political, and legal philosophy* (2020).
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