Who's afraid of academic freedom?

By Robin Vose

In the award-winning 1962 play, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf, violence and marital discord unfurl against a deeply dystopian vision of academic life: one where a university president enjoys unilateral license to prevent publication of a novel he deems inappropriate, or to block the promotion of a faculty member he dislikes. The author’s (and audience’s) casual acceptance of such a situation serves as a sobering reminder of just how fragile academic freedom and collegial governance truly are, and how easily they can be lost when neglected or taken for granted.

Yet, academic freedom lies at the heart of what we do as academics. Without it, we are nothing but glorified information delivery systems, funneling preapproved data into the brains of paying clients. Academic freedom is what permits us to do more — to act as thinking human beings who critique received wisdom, stretch the bounds of accepted convention, explore new paths and question old taboos. It is, in effect, a necessary precondition for true academic life. It is one of the essential tools of our trade, and our work can only suffer when it is limited or taken away.

Academic freedom enables debate, and this often means conflict. Conflicts can be off-putting, upsetting, even distressing, and sometimes they may result in the airing of ideas we disapprove of. But academic freedom also permits us to object, to discredit, and to condemn those ideas. Freedom of academic thought and expression does not itself give rise to objectionable propositions; it simply permits their full and frank discussion, by trained academic staff who have, in fact, been professionally charged with the responsibility to do so.

The alternative would be to entrust some entity with the authority — beyond the already formidable collegial mechanisms of grading and peer review — to determine which ideas are permissible, and which are not. History is full of instances where “thought tribunals” were established to make such determinations. But history would also tend to suggest that these are never a good idea.

So who is afraid of academic freedom? And why would anyone support its erosion or elimination?

Academic freedom is inimical above all to corporate, political, and/or religious interests which devalue or entirely reject the notion that higher education should function as a site of free exploration and debate. From their perspective universities and colleges should indeed serve primarily to (re)produce approved data, and to train new generations for the maintenance of a preferred status quo. So it should come as no surprise that the increased corporatization of academic management has also entailed a steady stream of efforts to limit academic freedom. Academic freedom is best an unnecessary complicating factor, and at worst a downright hindrance, to the managed pursuit of predictable, measurable, and marketable outcomes in service to neo-liberal economic imperatives.
At stake, then, is the nature of the academy itself. Free or constrained, corporate or human, discovery or profit-oriented. If we take academic freedom for granted, if we allow it to wither and shrink, if we allow it to be managed non-collegial authorities, we do risk becoming little more than information delivery conduits whose role might just well be taken over by computers and robots. We owe it to our students, to society, and to ourselves to ensure that this does not happen.

Academic freedom can be controversial, and its exercise will undoubtedly continue to inspire passionate debate for long as it exists as a mainstay of academic life. That is as it should be, for it is academic freedom that permits and indeed requires such debates. We need to continually examine the meaning and uses of academic freedom, just as we need to continually fight to sustain and preserve it. It really is the essence of what makes universities and colleges such uniquely valuable places in society, places that can be turned to for the constant testing and expansion of human experience.

I should perhaps mention, by the way, that I’m not a fan of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf. Like one critic in 1962, found it “neurotic, cruel and nasty.” Parts of it even offended and upset me. But I’m certainly glad we live in a world where I don’t have to check with any university presidents before expressing that opinion.