Academic Freedom


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These are dangerous times for universities. Latest data shows, “Only about 20% of the world’s population lives in countries where academic freedom is well protected” (Bothwell, 2021). Faculty are regularly ‘deplatformed’, researchers and scientists are pilloried and censored, not for violence or fraud, but because they expressed a particular view, stated an accepted truth of their discipline, researched and published on a sensitive issue from a perspective deemed ‘wrong’, or even ‘liked’ or ‘retweeted’ something anointed by the perpetually outraged as an affront (Suissa & Sullivan, 2021).

The UK University and College Union (UCU) notes that academic freedom is under increasing threat, where a quarter of UK academics report being bullied by colleagues because of their views (Karran & Mallinson, 2017). What has happened to academic freedom, critical inquiry, respectful debate and reasoned thinking? Rather than academia welcoming and facilitating the expression, exchange and testing of ideas, these are now suppressed by lurking fear, corporate diktat or policy capture (Stock, 2019). Some disciplines seem more blighted than others, for example women’s studies, philosophy and even biology. Nursing seems to have stayed under the radar of the new censoriousness but we cannot be complacent. Nursing’s academic community must restate its support for academic freedom to research, think, discuss and write without fear or intimidation from politicians, funding agencies or pressure groups.

Academic freedom as a cornerstone of the academy is being eroded (Stock, 2019; Suissa & Sullivan, 2021) by sustained activist campaigns intended to silence and
discredit scholars who challenge their particular views (Dreger, 2016). This is no
‘party political’ complaint as the ‘woke left’ are now as censorious and authoritarian
as the established right. The vitriol and oppression are the same but the
perpetrators have changed. Once corporate power brokers, media moguls and
unscrupulous governments tried to control academia, now it is pressure groups and
social media ‘pile-ons’. What is at stake here is not ideas or discussion per se, but
whether one group can effectively be allowed to silence and ostracize others. The
core of academic freedom is that staff and students raise, discuss, debate, engage
with and evaluate ideas without the constant threat of orchestrated social media
mobbing, doxxing and shaming in the digital stocks of today’s virtual village square.
Authors of this editorial would fundamentally disagree on numerous political and
social issues but we all agree that such differences of opinion should lead to thought-
provoking discussion, not bullying, silencing or sacking.

Nursing schools often fail to explicitly promote academic freedom, not because they
disagree with its tenets, but due to fear of possible threats to tenure or reputation,
they prefer to keep quiet rather than risk confected outrage or organized
harassment. This corrosive compliance undermines academic freedom and hampers
nurses’ development as articulate, critical thinkers. So, where are the academy’s
leaders – the vice-chancellors and deans when courage and leadership are so
urgently needed? Unfortunately, they have a declining record of defending staff and
protecting the academic freedom that is of far greater importance than the latest
social media indignation, ‘diversity champion award’, or spurious notion of ‘reputation
management’. With notable exceptions, many nursing deans seem ‘missing in
action’ rather than visibly upholding principles of freedom of speech and thought.
Nurses need to discuss complex arguments, theories and biopsychosocial issues however unpalatable or controversial they seem. Silently surrendering to the latest fugacious fad is not ‘doing better’. Rigorous debate and discussion help students navigate the myriad people and situations they will face as nurses that will tax their abilities and skills. There are no ‘safe spaces’ in practice devoid of racists, anti-vaxxers, misogynists, science deniers, Facebook experts and more. Nurses cannot simply walk away, complain to management that they ‘feel unsafe’, or demand that this patient be de-platformed. Nursing schools can engender and model productive disagreement, helping students and faculty to be intellectually curious, critically aware of personal and professional biases and assumptions and willing to change views due to new understanding or evidence. Faculty and staff will hold a range of diverse views that they should be able to express and discuss collegially without fear of retribution or concerted shaming from any outraged minority who may disagree with them.

Deans and Heads of School must support academic freedom to flourish in a civil, robust, constructive atmosphere. Diverse ideas and rebel thinking should be welcomed. Denunciatory, suppressive, virtue-signalling censorship should not. How can we ensure that academic freedom is encouraged and upheld in Schools of Nursing? At a minimum, schools should:

- Challenge standardised, rigid, approaches to teaching and learning
- Place routine critical inquiry and dialogue among students and faculty at the heart of teaching and learning
· Resist pressures to ‘don’t go there’, where issues are deemed controversial, sensitive or allegedly ‘not up for discussion’.

· Engage students in the importance of scholarly academic citizenship

· Organize debates, seminars and conferences with students and faculty around major issues

Universities and schools of nursing should be bastions of academic freedom, not cravenly complicit in its destruction.

As we finished writing this editorial, Essex University in the UK, following an absolutely damning external review (https://www.essex.ac.uk/information/event/review-of-two-events-involving-external-speakers) has issued fulsome apologies to two prominent academics who were ‘disinvited’ from seminar presentations for allegedly being “transphobes” who promoted “hate speech”. Their subsequent ‘blacklisting and exclusion’ was deemed “unlawful” https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/05/21/british-university-apologizes-disinviting-academics-over-views-gender. The Vice Chancellor was “deeply concerned to read the input into the review from some staff and students who said that they felt constrained to self-censor their speech and activity” https://www.essex.ac.uk/blog/posts/2021/05/17/review-of-two-events-with-external-speakers. Many other VCs should be similarly concerned. The University has now re-confirmed its commitment to academic free speech and to the idea of a university being a place where “difficult and sometimes uncomfortable conversations” can take place and where “ideas that some may find challenging or unpopular can be
expressed and debated” [https://www.essex.ac.uk/blog/posts/2021/05/17/review-of-two-events-with-external-speakers]. That this needs to be re-stated indicates the parlous condition of academic freedom in many Universities. The Essex Report does provide a glimmer of light and many universities are now urgently examining their policies and practices in its light. Nurses and nursing schools should learn the lessons of Essex University’s failures always be free to speak truth to power regardless of who happens to be wielding it.

References


