

Academic Freedom's Sad Reality

by [G. Tod Slone](#) (August 2023)



Revolution by Night, Max Ernst, 1923

Tenure corrupts, enervates, and dulls higher education.

It is, moreover, the academic culture's ultimate control mechanism to weed out the idiosyncratic, the creative, the nonconformist. –Charles J. Sykes, Profscam

One might also stipulate that “tenure corrupts, enervates, and dulls” the ethics of information because it inevitably limits information. Just the same, questioning and challenging the state of ethics of information seems to be on the increase, which is good, though also bad because that in itself might be indicative of the growing un-ethics of information.

Over the years, when I was a professor, I questioned and challenged many professors, administrators, and editors ... and continue to do so. Of course, I never got tenure. The usual response of those questioned and challenged was silence. After all, I had and have essentially no power over them. The most recent example of my challenges concerned [an instructor at Acadia University](#) in Nova Scotia. I'd sent a criticism to him and his department colleagues, as well as to the university student newspaper editors. The response was typical silence. The instructor in question, a “political scientist,” had written a handful of articles regarding campus free speech or absence thereof ... in America. The term “political scientist,” at least in my mind, is an oxymoron and should thus be avoided. What it does is glorify and objectify the study of politics, even when highly subjective.

Regarding the instructor, my critique was incited by a *Chronicle of Higher Education* interview, [“Why One Scholar Sees Little Evidence on Campus of a Free-Speech ‘Crisis’ – but Plenty of Panic,”](#) which provoked me to wonder why he and his interviewer ignored the situation of campus free speech in Canada, where he works. Indeed, the situation there is certainly far worse than that in America. As for the latter, the First Amendment permits so-called hate speech. In Canada,

however, section [319 of the Criminal Code](#) prohibits it. The subjectivity of terms like “hate,” as well as “disturb the peace,” is egregious, thus highly problematic. It is really that simple.

And so, how does silence, as opposed to debate, mesh with being a purported free-speech proponent? How does closing the door on unwanted information constitute ethical? Has silence become golden in the realm of academe when rare critic outsiders suddenly appear? How does that affect information ethics?

The problem, the reality of so-called academic freedom, is the egregious de facto near absence of overt free speech amongst professors. Many times, as a former professor, I'd witnessed closed-door colleague sessions of criticism regarding other professors and/or administrators. “Close the door,” said one professor to another. And yes, I still vividly recall that incident. So, how do instructors and professors who dare not criticize overtly, who self-censor, somehow get their students to embrace free speech?

And so, I posed those questions to the Acadia University instructor and his colleagues ... and received no answers. Those, like that instructor, who do not have tenure, must choose between speaking out for truth and self-censoring for career. But, as Sykes implied (see quote above), those who eventually climb the ladder to tenure tend to be conformists and thus tend not to exercise their purported academic freedom. For them, academic freedom is indeed the freedom to conform. In essence, most of them really don't need such freedom at all. And indeed, in the realm of the campus free speech question, tenure ought to be examined. To truly exercise ones purported academic freedom (with impunity), one would need many openly supportive colleagues and costly legal assistance. For me, on the tenure track, I did not have the former because I was highly critical of my colleagues, who were indeed sycophants. The union did provide me with a

lawyer, but she failed to help me keep my teaching job. She did manage to get me an extra year's salary as compensation. But compensation for what? The administrators admitted no foul play at all. For details and documents, see "[Fitchburg State University \(Fitchburg, MA\)–Free Speech in Peril.](#)" Thus, for me, I did not have academic freedom because I was fired. Punished speech is not free speech.

In any case, what might be the taboo subjects for professors (and instructors), who declare themselves to be free-speech advocates? Perhaps professors (and instructors) ought to create personal lists with that regard and include reasons why they dare not break the taboos. Then perhaps they ought to share their lists with colleagues and actually publish several of their lists in the student newspaper. Wouldn't that be amazingly unique in the realm of higher ed? Their lists might include, for example, thou shalt not criticize the editors of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*. With that regard, I was critical of the latter's policy regarding reader comments sections in an essay, [To Censor or Not to Censor: An Examination of Inside Higher Education's 'Comment Policy'](#), published in the *Journal of Information Ethics*. The editors' response was unsurprising silence. Part of a professorial list ought to include thou shalt not criticize the department chairperson and deans and also thou shalt not criticize the ideology of identity politics and its aberrant absence of reason.

How about adding to the lists: thou shalt not criticize the highly subjective nature of evaluations. With that regard, again cite Sykes: "In most cases, what little the senior colleagues hear about the junior professor's teaching is in the form of second-hand reports, often little more than gossip and hearsay." Cite also Lionel Lewis, author of *Scaling the Ivory Tower*, "Little precise information about the teaching of individual faculty is secured. To the contrary, there is evidence that what is known about someone's classroom

performance is fabricated from gossip, rumor, ex parte evidence, and other random and unreliable means of intelligence.”

Thou shalt not publish a critical article in the local newspaper regarding the university in question. In essence, thou shalt keep intellectual corruption within the realm of the institution in question. In each institution where I taught, inevitably the president and deans were intellectually corrupt. Indeed, can one actually rise to those positions without being intellectually corrupt? I don't think so! And so, in the name of information ethics, one should begin there and hold periodic open debates to students and professors regarding the taboos, those great walls hindering free speech and information ethics.

And so, free speech and debate must replace the reigning university professor/administrator *modus operandi* of silence is golden. But as long as universities and colleges remain de facto businesses, that will not happen. If a professor chooses to stand up and counter the university business reality, he or she will face consequences and must therefore be prepared for that inevitability. After all, a war is not won without soldiers, who end up dying for the cause. Camille Paglia had rightfully argued in an [interview](#) with *Reason* magazine in 2016: “Unfortunately, tenure has led to the ossification of American education. The hiring, promotion, and tenure system has institutionalized sycophancy toward those in power.”

Sycophancy of course means controlled speech, as opposed to free speech. Paglia obtained tenure at the University of the Arts and, perhaps unsurprisingly, echoed the same silence of the professors when criticized (See [The Professors—Pygmies with Chevrons](#)).

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G. Tod Slone, PhD, lives on Cape Cod, where he was permanently banned in 2012 without warning or due process from Sturgis Library, one of the very oldest in the country. His civil rights were being denied because he was not permitted to attend any cultural or political events held at his neighborhood library. The only stated reason for the banning was “for the safety of the staff and public,” yet he has no criminal record and has never made a threat. His real crime was that he challenged, in writing, the library’s “collection development” mission that stated “libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view.” His point of view was somehow not part of “all points of view.” In November 2022, he requested the library [rescind its banning decree](#), which it finally did. He is a dissident poet/writer/cartoonist and editor of [The American Dissident](#).

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