Academic Freedom, Autonomy and Accountability M. Callahan


Academic Freedom
- Concept flows from fundamental nature of universities as institutions dedicated to the search for knowledge and its transmission to succeeding generations
- Central to debate about governance
- In most fundamental form, is about freedom of enquiry and freedom of expression
- Usually understood to mean the right of individual teachers and researchers to pursue knowledge and to choose subjects for research and teaching without fear of persecution in terms of any political, religious or social orthodoxy.
- CAUT defines as entitlement of members of the academic community "regardless of prescribed doctrine, to freedom in carrying out research and in publishing the results thereof, freedom of teaching and of discussion, freedom to criticize the university and the faculty association and freedom from institutional censorship.
- Shils – the essential nature of academic freedom is fundamentally intertwined with the underlying purpose of the university – the freedom to seek and transmit the truth”.
- Less consensus exists on extension of academic freedom to include academic self-government (argued by Shils) since it moves it from an individual to a collective right and into the area of institutional autonomy.
- Academic freedom seen as a responsibility as well as a right; must be exercised in “conformity with certain obligations to the academic institution and its rules and standards” (Shils) “Academic freedom is a privilege; it presumes responsibility, objectivity and integrity” (Dressel)
- Academic freedom does not protect individuals from legal sanctions if laws are violated (e.g., laws re obscenity, human rights, libel, promotion of hatred)
- Academic freedom cannot be used in a way which obstructs the equal opportunity of students to learn (harassment, intimidation, etc.)
- Academic freedom does not protect individuals from dismissal on grounds of incompetence, moral turpitude or neglect of duty.
- Institutions considered to have right to make assignments provided they are reasonable and not related to restrictions on freedom of speech, etc. (US courts)
- Faculty have obligation to perform responsibilities of the position (teaching, research, service)

Autonomy
- Frequently used in the field of higher education but not often defined.
- Central to debate about governance
Simply put, it means the power to govern without outside controls.
- Needs to be differentiated into “substantive” and “procedural”
- Substantive autonomy is the power of an institution to determine its own goals and
programs. “What” of academe.

- Procedural autonomy is the power to determine the means by which those goals and programs will be pursued. “How” of academe. Provides management with needed flexibility. (Note that Ontario universities are more autonomous in this area than colleges.)
- Debate about relationship of academic freedom and autonomy. Some say the same, some say related but can differ in aspects
  - Highly autonomous institutions have lacked academic freedom (Oxford and Cambridge in early 19th century) and some non-autonomous universities have enjoyed a high degree of academic freedom (Berlin University)
  - Hurtubise and Rowat say that universities claim autonomy in order to protect areas that are not essential to academic freedom and shouldn't be protected. 'Should not claim autonomy for areas that are of vital interest to the state and society.'
  - Justice Frankfurter, US Supreme Court: university autonomy = “the four essential freedoms of a university – to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, that may be taught, how it should be taught and who may be admitted to study”.
  - Ashby defines as freedom to select staff and students and to determine conditions under which they remain in the university, freedom to determine curriculum content and degree standards and freedom to allocate funds across categories of expenditures.
  - Hurtubise and Rowat say that control over admissions, academic staff and instructional programs are most essential ingredients of autonomy. International Association of Universities adds research and resource allocation.
  - AUCC, 1988 listed the power to select and appoint staff, select and admit and discipline students, set and control curriculum, establish organizational arrangements for the carrying out of academic work, create programs and direct resources to them, certify completion of a program of study and grant degrees.
  - An argument for autonomy has been that it gives rise to diversity. However, this has not been the case. Rather, left alone, institutions tend to become more uniform. “The most obvious aspect of the maintenance of diversity, in many cases, appears when some institutions are bluntly told that they cannot expect to become 'complete' universities.” (Dressel)
  - Some argue that autonomy protects universities role as social critic. However, this is a confusion between academic freedom and autonomy. Social criticism is the role of individual academics, not institutions.
  - Davis – “the ambitions and desires of a given institution may have to be tempered by the overall requirements of society.”
  - Increase in number and size of higher education institutions (massification) led to increasing state control in many cases. This was related to a more general development in the 60s and 70s in which the state played a larger role in all aspects of public life.

In 1980s, state's interest in higher education increased because of a general concern about the quality of the educational experience and the importance of enhancing quality as part of global competitiveness. Also increasing demand that the government protect the rights of the
disenfranchised.

- 1990s era of fiscal restraint focused on need of higher education institutions to be more accountable in terms of the expenditure of public funds as well as for the perceived and actual outcomes associated with those funds.
- Generally agreed that some limits to institutional autonomy are necessary to coordinate the interests of the institutions and those of the community.
- Millet (1984) concluded that all reports and studies examined agreed that some kind of state coordination of higher education is desirable. Institutional autonomy cannot be absolute. Need to reconcile the public stake in higher education with the institutional interest in freedom of action.
- Government sets goals for outcomes of higher education but institution can set means to achieve those goals. Leads to concept of accountability to demonstrate that the means did achieve the goals.
- Generally conceded that the most important role for the state is the determination of the level of financial support for higher education generally and for its equitable distribution among the institutions.
- From independent study group commissioned by CAUT, 1993:
  - Equally significant responsibility assigned to the state is to ensure diversity and complementarity of institutional missions and the appropriateness of those missions collectively to the achievement of public policy objectives.
  - State should have responsibility for major changes to the system when they involve major expense or change basic orientation of the system. E.g., opening more, closing some, setting student fees and aid systems, expanding or contracting number of professional faculties...
  - State has responsibility for defining and assuring access. Includes articulation between universities and secondary and vocational education.

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**Accountability**

- Usually means the requirement to demonstrate responsible actions to one or more constituencies. Whether the autonomy granted an institution has been responsibly, legally and appropriately used.
- In higher education, one of the key problems around accountability is about accountability to outside constituencies
- In terms of institutional democratisation debates, there is increasing tension around more accountability within the higher education community
- Originally, accountability was seen as limited to financial information to demonstrate that public funds had been spent responsibly.
- In the 70s and 80s, concept was broadened to include demonstration that the objectives of the institution had been met and in the most efficient way – measures the relationship between outcomes and resource utilization.
- Accountability and autonomy are considered complementary concepts. Dressel –
accountability...is the price of autonomy. Autonomy does not include the freedom to be irresponsible and unaccountable. Critics of this view argue that increased accountability decreases institutional autonomy. Balance needed is enough accountability to make institutions responsive without destroying academic ethos.

- Many argue that accountability should be developed internally rather than imposed from outside. Government pressures are often more political in nature than reflective of community pressures. Argument is that universities should demonstrate that goals were developed and achieved and that processes were rationally developed and applied. Weakness in this argument is that it is limited to individual institutions and that the performance of the system as a system in terms of providing diversity and eliminating unnecessary duplication is not measured by internal self-regulation at the institutional level. (Skolnik)

- Important to recognize that institutions and the state have different roles in terms of the provision of higher education and they need to work together to ensure that the appropriate role of each is enhanced. (Newman)

Academic freedom refers more to individual rights and autonomy and accountability deal with relationships between institutions, government and higher education constituencies.