

De-platforming: The Morality of Restricting Speech at Universities



Friday, February 28, 2020
2:00–5:00pm | ART 281

2:00–3:15pm

In Defense of Gatekeeping

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Universities are a battleground in debates about freedom of expression. One of the familiar questions universities face is whether to regulate invited speakers. This question arises most often when a speaker defends controversial positions that are deemed to be hostile to members of the university community. Administrators then face a difficult choice about how to accommodate the competing values of freedom of expression and creating an inclusive campus environment. In this talk I show how, as institutions of higher learning, universities occupy a distinctive role within society. Inherent in this role is the idea of standards. Academic standards are central and indispensable to the function of universities and these, I argue, can provide a rationale for regulating which speakers are invited to campus and how they are expected to present their ideas within this space. Not all speakers will be able or willing to meet these standards. In order to preserve their distinctive roles as institutions of higher learning universities should embrace rather than shy away from drawing these lines.

3:30–5:00pm

Liberal Study and Freedom of Expression on Campus

Mark Mercer, Professor, Saint Mary's University

If the task of higher education is job training or bringing students from historically marginalized groups into the ranks of society's managers and professionals, then perhaps arguments against freedom of expression on campus have some force. But for any place of liberal study, no restrictions on the content or mode of expression can be warranted. This is for two reasons. First, liberal study aims at creating understandings of things as they are simply for the sake of creating such understandings. But the road to understanding is blocked whenever topics or ideas are out of bounds. Second, people who engage in liberal study want to believe truly and value soundly—but they want also to believe truly and value soundly on the basis of evidence and argument, and not through fear or favour. Restrictions on expression, though, use social pressures to bring people to believe and value certain things.

Everyone welcome!



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