

28 November 2019

Dear Vice Chancellor,

You will be aware of two recent incidents at Massey University that have attracted media attention and engendered public debate about the role of universities as venues for freely expressing, exchanging and contesting ideas.

The first was a decision to cancel the *Speak Up For Women 'Feminism 2020'* event, with “health, safety and wellbeing obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, and ... duty of care to the University community” cited as grounds for the decision. The second was the removal of posters supporting the pro-democracy protest movement in Hong Kong. The university’s communications manager cited “complaints from staff and students” as the reason for the decision to remove the posters.

These incidents follow a related one in 2018, when the Vice Chancellor of Massey University banned Don Brash from speaking on campus. When that decision was announced, security concerns were again cited as justification. However it became clear – on the basis of leaked emails – that this was a pretext, and that the actual reason was that the Vice Chancellor disagreed with Brash’s position on separate political representation for Māori.

The three Massey incidents are the first prominent cases in New Zealand of the phenomenon of ‘cancel-culture’ that has become commonplace on campuses in North America and the United Kingdom over the past several years. We see cancel culture as a direct threat to the fundamental mission of universities to foster free debate and a free exchange of ideas on campuses. As such, we are determined that it should not be allowed to gain a foothold in New Zealand.

The mission of universities to foster free expression and debate, when properly enacted, has two consequences of inestimable benefit. The first is that theories and ideas are winnowed and refined. This has a moderating effect on public discourse beyond the university and, often, enables sound input to public policy. The second benefit is to our students; through exposure to ideas that challenge and sometimes disturb them, they become more intellectually robust.

A common factor in a great many instances of ‘de-platforming’ on overseas campuses – and at least two of the Massey incidents – is that ‘safety’ is cited as a reason for banning or cancelling speakers. In some cases, the concern appears to refer to physical safety, typically because those intending to protest a speaking event have ostensibly threatened to use violence. Cancelling speakers on these grounds amounts to a ‘thug’s veto’ and hands victory to those who would use threats to silence others. While we recognise the responsibility of university administrators to maintain order on campuses, acceding to a thug’s veto is about as inimical to academic life as it is possible to be.

In other cases ‘safety’ concerns seem to centre on a purported potential for psychological, rather than physical, harm. In many ways, banning or cancelling speakers on the grounds that exposure to their ideas may cause psychological harm is even more insidious than surrendering to a thug’s veto.

In his acclaimed book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, American psychologist Jonathan Haidt has argued – supported by a convincing evidence base – that children must be exposed to risk and challenge in order to build their resilience. Failure to do so in the name of keeping them safe at all costs does not result in them growing up to be happy, well-adjusted adults; rather, they are likely to become fragile, anxious and depressed. By the same token, if we seek to protect our students from challenging, difficult and even offensive ideas, we deprive them of potentially productive grist to their intellectual mills. Furthermore, we compromise the development of an ability to cope with a

world in which they will encounter a vast range of viewpoints that differ – often greatly – from their own.

If we who are charged with equipping the intellectual leadership of the future, shield students from debate and discourse on the grounds that it may upset them, we leave them vulnerable to confirmation bias, peer-group conformity, unquestioning obedience to authority and all of those other human propensities that must be held in check if free and democratic societies are to be maintained. For these reasons we believe that failure on the part of academics to stand stalwartly for free expression and debate on campuses amounts to a dereliction of our duty.

We respectfully request that you, as the leader of a New Zealand university, make a public statement affirming your commitment to these core academic principles and values. We further request that you repudiate ‘cancel culture’ and affirm your university as a place at which free academic discourse can thrive, to the benefit of our students, our society and the future of democracy.

We refer you to the “Chicago principles”, which lay out the limits of acceptable expression at the University of Chicago, as follows: “The University may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the University. In addition, the University may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of the University”¹.

Within those very broad limits, the University of Chicago has taken the view that all members of the university must be able “to discuss any problem that presents itself”, noting that, “although members of the University community are free to criticize and contest the views expressed on campus, and to criticize and contest speakers who are invited to express their views on campus, they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe. To this end, the University has a solemn responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless freedom of debate and deliberation, but also to protect that freedom when others attempt to restrict it”.

We invite you to adopt the Chicago principles at your own university. Doing so would help to ensure that the spirit of free expression and debate that has given rise to the most prosperous and emancipated societies in human history, in which universities have traditionally played so vital a role, will continue to thrive, to the benefit of future generations of students and academics.

Best regards,

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¹ <https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf>