

**Presidents' Discussion Series**  
**University Autonomy: Faculty and Administrative Perspectives**  
**Friday, November 14, 3:00 – 4:30pm**

***Discussion Summary***

Institutional autonomy is required so that we can defend the University's position as a place where knowledge is created and questioned, and the ability to do so also requires academic freedom. The University, therefore, has a permanent obligation to defend the academic freedom of its members: institutional autonomy has failed if academic freedom has not been upheld. To defend academic freedom, the University needs to be autonomous: it needs to be able to act independent of the government and other organisations. Universities compromise their autonomy in their relations with the government and other organisations.

As a publicly funded institution, we need to be transparent and responsive to government and public demands. Our autonomy is threatened when our direction is determined by additional funding offered by the government for specific initiatives. The government does not force us to do certain things but there are financial motivations for us to do the things they want. This, in part, arises from the government's desire to have post secondary education feed the Alberta labour market: Colleges do this but Universities should not have this responsibility.

With reductions to operational funds and research grants provided by the government, universities across Canada are resorting to corporate sponsorships to fund their programs. This has resulted in infringement of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Though this has not yet happened at MRU, it could happen here and we need to be cognizant of the related concerns and put in place appropriate protections to prevent it.

- Threats to Research: we need to resist ideologically motivated policies of the government of the day and advocate against cuts to basic research funding and the commoditization of research.
- Threats to Teaching: we need to question the implementation of learning outcomes that restrict teachers' academic freedom and the University's autonomy by imposing targets and external measurements.
- The Government's restriction of University Autonomy: MRUs mandate letter privileges the University's responsibility to support the Alberta economy and to conduct applied research to meet regional industry needs. The MRFA rejected the assumption that the Government had a role in giving us this mandate, but the MRU Board of Governors signed the mandate letter against the MRFA's request. The Board of Governors should be lobbying the government to protect the University's autonomy.
- Protecting University Autonomy and Academic Freedom in University collaborations: there needs to be explicit protection of academic freedom in every single donation, sponsorship and partnership agreement.

MRU does not have corporate partnerships in the same way that other Universities have: the CAUT report *Open for Business* refers to problems that do not exist at MRU. The MRU foundation recognizes its responsibility to ensure that donor and sponsorship agreements clearly specify what MRU can or cannot provide in return. The Foundation ensures that the institution is not put in a position with potential reputational issues and that there is no impact on academic freedom or institutional autonomy. As we see more namings, sponsored programs and privately funded initiatives, these will not be *partnerships*: the money provided is either a gift or a sponsorship and MRU is the steward of the funds.

Who the corporate donor is and what they do is often considered important. Because of where we are, a lot of support received has been from oil and gas or environmental agencies. When these corporate entities make donation agreements they are trying to do good work. They know there are going to be positive, negative and questionable aspects to what they do, but there is a lot of evidence that they want to promote balance and 'help out' (and they have a lot of funds to support these initiatives). For instance, Imperial Oil funded an aboriginal program, Petro Canada funded research and scholarships for young innovators, and Talisman and EnCana funded the Institute for Environmental Sustainability. This institute has an interdisciplinary perspective on environmental sustainability and it is doing some great work. The donors determined the framework and potential projects for the Institute, but it operates independently. Donors often want the initiatives they fund to be student focussed, and they do want a positive and direct interaction with students. We want to facilitate this but will not allow it to impact academic work.

When corporate partnerships are established, it is important to remember that administrators do not stop thinking as faculty members. Because of their prior experience as faculty members, the President and the Deans at MRU are aware of the requirements for and the importance of academic freedom and University autonomy.

## *Discussion Notes*

University autonomy is often thought of in terms of relations with the government and the University's mandate. It is, however, also related to the responsibilities and accountabilities of the Board of Governors to the government and in responding to public demands. University Autonomy is also connected to our relationships with private donors and corporate partnerships. All of this relates to academic freedom which is, however, separate.

### *Panelists*

#### *David Docherty*

University autonomy exists within the larger construct of the Social Contract. This term reminds us of some of the things we give up for our freedoms. We need to be transparent, have publicly audited statements that show how we spend our money. The government can provide extra money to do certain things in post-secondary. They do not force us to do certain things but there are financial motivations for us to do the things they want. This is a real threat to University autonomy and we need to be careful and cognizant of it. Our relationship with the government is critical: we need strong relations but we also need to clarify what the lines are. Mandates and letters of expectation in Alberta are not as stringent as they are in other provinces. The University reports to the Board and if the Board is happy the government should not get involved.

Colleges feed the labour market: Universities should not have this responsibility. However, it is important for us to understand that our graduates need to find meaningful work. It is important for us to talk about transferable skills, graduation rates, and employment rates. Responsiveness to the labour market is handled well at MRU with its many advisory councils. Externally regulated programs such as interior design or nursing have restricted autonomy but this does not mean they can tell us how to deliver our programs. They can determine the skill sets our graduates need but, in terms of the advisory councils, they are only advisory and we can stay informed and choose how to respond to their needs.

We are in an era of increasing public scrutiny of public funds. This crosses the line when the public or the government questions the specifics of what we do: this is the Board's decision. When we are so transparent we leave ourselves open to comment on whether we should be doing things in a certain way. If a faculty member uses University funds to attend a conference they are responsible to their Chair or their Dean to determine if it is an appropriate use of funds. It is not appropriate for the media to question if we should be sending faculty to conferences. We need to spend money economically but we are responsible for deciding how we spend it.

When we moved to bicameral governance, the University's academic autonomy was vested in GFC which is comprised of a majority of faculty: this is a good thing. The Board of Governors and the Board Chair are to protect University autonomy in their direct dealings with the government. Board Chairs are able to lobby the government in different ways and this is what they should be doing to protect the University and its autonomy.

#### *Carole Simpson*

Fundraising and fund development.

The Foundation does the fundraising for the institution within the context of laws that apply to fundraising. We need to adhere to legislation and institutional policy. Legislation defines a donation as a gift to the institution without the expectation of the donor receiving anything in return. Gift agreements are structured around this. Sponsorships are different altogether. Sponsorships are about marketing and they expect to get something in return.

We have a responsibility to act as stewards of donors' dollars. It is our responsibility to ensure that when we make an agreement with a donor we are clear on what we can or cannot give them in return and we cannot put the institution in a position where there is a reputational issue or where there are impacts on academic freedom or institutional autonomy. Recognition through naming or how money will be used and what program it will go to needs to be specified in the gift agreement.

Namings are in recognition of the gift but the donor has no involvement in the programs. This is the case with the Bella Concert Hall, The Riddell Library and the Nexen Scholars Program. At the end of the funding term the name will no longer apply and we can re-name things that are then funded by other donors. Also, some donors do not want their names to be attached such as the Iniskim center being funded by Imperial Oil. Pearls of Wisdom is sponsored by RBC and they are very obviously recognized at the event because they have a sponsorship not a gift agreement with MRU.

If you have specific questions about aspects of the policy or gift agreements then you can ask them.

MRU does not have corporate partnerships in the same way that other Universities have. The CAUT report *Open for Business* refers to problems that do not exist here. This is not something that is commonly expected or practiced. Even into the future as we see namings, programs privately funded initiatives these are not partnerships: they are gifts or sponsors and we are stewards of the funds.

### Discussion

- How does naming work with a building?
  - o There is a naming policy for philanthropic donations.

- o MRU will name a facility for a minimum of 10 years and the max is the life or use of the facility. The caveat is that our relationship with the donor would change if our partnership can negatively reflect on the University: the Board can revoke the name. Usually, the name stays till the building is torn down.
- Does money have to be returned if the name is rescinded?
  - o No. Returning donations is very difficult and complicated.
  - o The donor gets a tax receipt and the money then belongs to the institution. The Policy states the conditions of the donations.
  - o The University has declined donations and voluntarily given back money. One such donation was because the donor became engaged in the program and the faculty and it became an untenable relationship.

*Jeff Goldberg*

As Dean, I work at the next level of implementation. Administrators do not stop thinking as faculty members so people at the level of Dean or President still are aware of the requirements for academic freedom and University autonomy.

There have been some good experiences with corporate partnerships at MRU.

If you enter a relationship where the structured expectations are so high to have deliverables then you are entering into a contract. A corporation can work with the faculty member(s) or institute to get some type of work done. This agreement would be very clearly spelled out. It is important to distinguish between these contracts and corporate sponsorships. A corporation can establish a framework around what groups of students or programs are targeted for a scholarship or gift. You can talk about and agree on the framework but not on decisions related to academic activities. Sometimes when you speak with potential donors clarity needs to be provided for the donor about this framework restriction.

From a Dean's perspective, we prefer to receive endowment agreements which allow an initiative to have real life. Recently, however, arrangements to fund initiatives or often for a limited amount of time which is unfortunate. This makes it operationally difficult because we bring someone in for the position or program and then they need to go somewhere once the funding is gone.

Advisory committees, of which there are two in the Faculty of Science and Technology, related to very professional degrees for which there are strong markets for our graduates. These committees provide a chance to work with the community, non profits and sometimes the government. The question of autonomy has come up in these advisory committees; wherein, they provided advice as requested but the department chose to move in a different direction. We need the advice but it is still advisory and we are an academic community exercising our autonomy. The advisory committees are fine with this as they are really there to help.

What is important is who the corporate donor is, what do they do and are we comfortable with that. Because of what and where we are, a lot of the support for science and technology has been from oil and gas or environment related agencies. It came up in GFC that we ask who we take funds from. We know that these corporate entities make these donation agreements they are trying to do good work. They know there are going to be positive, negative and questionable aspects to what they do, but there is a lot of evidence that they want to have balance and help out and they have a lot of funds to support these initiatives.

- Imperial oil funded an aboriginal program
- Petro Canada funding supports research and scholarships for young innovator awards
- Talisman and EnCana funded the institute for environmental sustainability. This is an interdisciplinary perspective to environmental sustainability and it is doing some great work. They determined the framework and potential projects
- We have a student initiative starting up with Newalta.

Donors often want it to be student focussed. They do want a positive and direct interaction: we want to facilitate this but not allow it to impact academic work.

*Scott Murray*

We may not have encountered these issues at MRU yet, but we may.

Institutional Autonomy is required so that we can defend the University's position as a place where knowledge is created and questioned and you need academic freedom for this.

The University has a permanent obligation to defend the academic freedom of its members. To do this the University needs to be autonomous it needs to be able to act independent of the government and other organisations.

CAUT policy statement identifies this vital and peculiar relationship between academic freedom and University autonomy:

Academic freedom must not be confused with institutional autonomy. Post-secondary institutions are autonomous to the extent that they can set policies independent of outside influence. That very autonomy can protect academic freedom from a hostile external environment, but it can also facilitate an internal assault on academic freedom. Academic freedom is a right of members of the academic staff, not of the institution. The employer shall not abridge academic freedom on any grounds, including claims of institutional autonomy. - See more at: <http://www.caut.ca/about-us/caut-policy/lists/caut-policy-statements/policy-statement-on-academic-freedom#sthash.sfp5wV3.dpuf>

Institutional autonomy has failed if academic freedom has not been upheld. Academic freedom has its roots in the foundation of the University. Universities compromise their autonomy in their relations with other organisations.

Threats to University autonomy in Canada:

- As universities we need to resist ideologically motivated policies of the government of the day, such as the federal government's policies on academic research in particular relating to the Earth Sciences.
- Cuts to funding of research (tri-council, SSHRC and NSSHRC, discovery grants and insight grants) and the tying of such research grants to commoditization of research causing new boutique programs.
- The federal government's policy is short sighted and the effects will become more apparent as less basic research is being done.

These threats to research also affect teaching.

- Learning outcomes pose threats to teachers' academic freedom and the University's autonomy by imposing targets and external measurements.
- Learning outcomes have been adopted as part of the accreditation process of certain programs.

Letters of expectation

- MRU's letter privileges the University's responsibility to support the Alberta economy and to conduct applied research to meet regional industry needs. These needs are listed first throughout the mandate letter as the University's reason for existing.
- The MRFA rejected the assumption that the Government had the role to give us this mandate, but the MRU Board of Governors signed it against our request.

CAUT guidelines on University collaborations / suggestions for policies:

- Explicit protection of academic freedom in every single donation or sponsorship.
- Protect the academic integrity of the University – corporate funding should not cause students to narrow their research at the expense of the usual curriculum

The Board has a vital role in preserving University autonomy. They are to ensure the public is well served by the University and to protect the University's Autonomy. The Board should stand up to the government when it needs to in order to fulfill its role

When hiring senior administrators it is important they were faculty first and have had academic positions so that they understand the academic perspective.

*Discussion*

- One threat on autonomy at MRU over a year ago was the minister's letter to the Board of governors directing the board to reopen the agreement to negotiate O and O grid adjustments.
- One common element is that funding from government, donations and research grants are all provided with certain outcomes expected. In most cases these do not affect University autonomy. When they do it is our job to explain why that is not acceptable. This is most relevant in scientific research. Basic research eventually becomes research that can be applied for the common good. The government does not seem to understand this.
- Universities need to also be very careful in their international relationships and dealings
- The CAUT report is really good and should, for the most part, inform our outlook on this matter.
- It is comforting to know that Mount Royal is approaching this matter with due diligence.
- What is the relationship between University autonomy to the public perception? The public understands that they can speak, that there is freedom of the press, but there seems to be some misconstrued perceptions of academic freedom. Most of the time we are doing this work for the betterment of society. How do we sell this to the public?
  - o Academic freedom is very broad: it covers research, speaking about the University, teaching etc.
  - o Media scrutiny is something that needs to be factored in and there is not currently a good response to this problem.
- The problem with academic freedom and knowledge creation is that it can negatively impact profits and profits are what motivate corporations. If knowledge is a threat then it will not be funded by corporations or, likely, by the government. We are in a terrible position because we should be able to criticize corporations but we are restricted from doing that if we are accepting money from them.