

Dangerous Universities: A Review

by [Patrick Keeney](#) (February 2023)



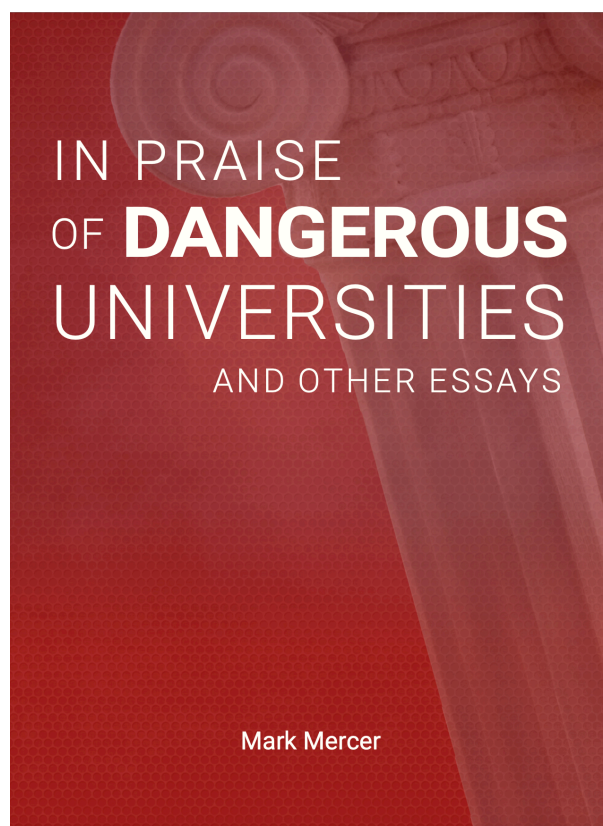
Selwyn College, Cambridge, J Phillip Davies, 1970

The university has always been the site of contested visions. But ever since, say, the 1987 publication of Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, myriad critics from across the political spectrum have been raising alarm bells about the erosion of liberal learning in the academy, a task that has historically been at the very heart of the university's mission.

Recent years have witnessed a troubling new challenge to

liberal learning, namely the rise of identity politics and the instantiation of policies promoting diversity, inclusion, and equity (DIE). This new ideology advances the idea that western institutions are irredeemably racist, colonialist, sexist, bigoted or otherwise fatally flawed. To compensate for past injustices, revolutionary alterations are required to the function of society's most important institutions. Museums and art galleries need to alter their mandates; the inherent patriarchy of the judiciary needs to be reformed; streets and public buildings need to be renamed; statues need to be torn down, and once-celebrated national heroes and heroines should be memory-holed for failing to live up to today's demanding ethical requirements. DIE is a totalizing system that brooks no compromises.

This new orthodoxy has nowhere been more transformative than in Canadian universities.[\[*\]](#) As must be obvious to even the most casual observer, something is gravely amiss in our institutions of higher education. Almost daily, we hear of professors being hounded out of their job by a disgruntled student or colleague; of speakers being de-platformed or cancelled because their views have offended the *dogma du jour*; of a social media lynch mob ending the career of a distinguished academic; of administrators cowed by the aggrieved moral posturing of some interest group or another; of undergraduates being sheltered from what they perceive are offensive ideas; and perhaps most ominously of all, of hiring and promotion decisions no longer being made based on academic merit, but on such immutable and glaringly non-academic



considerations as ethnicity, race or gender.

In brief, the ancient idea that the quest for truth should define the university's mission has been displaced by the notion that universities should be institutions dedicated to the quest for social justice.

In Praise of Dangerous Universities is a collection of essays by Mark Mercer, a professor of philosophy at Saint. Mary's University in Halifax. Dr. Mercer is also the president of the Society For Academic Freedom and Scholarship, an organization devoted to the free and open exchange of ideas. He has been at the front lines of some of the most fractious university issues in recent years. Few Canadian commentators can bring to bear both the theoretical nous as well as the battle scars from being on the front lines of some of the most bitter and acrimonious university battles in Canadian history. In introducing this volume, Andrew Irvine calls Mark Mercer a "national treasure."

In this impassioned book, the author reminds us of what is at stake in the fight for the soul of the university and what Canadians are at risk of losing. Mercer articulates and defends a vision of liberal learning as dispassionate enquiry, the central aim of which is "getting it right." This entails academic freedom and respect for the intellectual autonomy of both professors and students. For Mercer, universities should be institutions devoted to the pursuit of truth and the passing on of these truths to the next generation. This enterprise rests crucially on the free exchange of ideas and open debate.

Mercer acknowledges from the start that universities serve the larger society and that there is no necessity for society to use its universities to *educate* the young, as opposed to socializing or indoctrinating students, preparing them for the workforce or in other ways using the university to advance the economic interests of a nation. Or indeed to use universities

to further the cause of social justice.

But the vision of the university Mercer is concerned with defending is that which comes to us from the Enlightenment, and it is this understanding that leads to his particular prescriptions for university life, the twin pillars of which rest on the quest for truth and intellectual autonomy. Central to both is the notion of academic freedom, which “protects researchers so that they might discover the truth and tell it to the world ... Because academics value truth, education and the university’s mission to promote them, academics should value academic freedom.” Until yesterday, the notions advanced in these essays were quotidian truths about the university and its ideals. Now we’re told that the proper function of the university is not to seek the truth but to further the aims of social justice, both within the institution itself as well as in the wider society. For many, including Professor Mercer, this represents a very poor exchange.

As he notes in the Preface, “In 2004 ... I noticed that my university and others were no longer defending the values underlying the academic endeavour and liberal study.” His response was to write a newspaper column under the sobriquet of *The Cranky Professor*. Many of these columns have been edited and rewritten for inclusion in this collection. (In the interests of full disclosure, I had a small hand in editing this collection.) And while most of the essays in this collection were occasioned by an immediate concern, such as, for example, the posting of cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad on a colleague’s office door, they nevertheless address perennial questions about higher education.

It is worth remarking that Mercer, unlike many professors, took the time and effort to write for the newspapers and the popular press. Journalism is generally frowned upon or dismissed by the professoriate and is given little credence by tenure and promotion committees. It pays little by way of career advancement.

Yet there is a certain intellectual snobbery at play here, for surely it is among the critical responsibilities of academics to communicate with the general public. And as the author here demonstrates, journalism at its best can address crucially important and perennial topics in lucid and concise prose that is accessible to the general public. (Bertrand Russell was once chastised for writing for the popular press. He responded to his critics by titling his next collection of columns "Unpopular Essays.")

Mercer's prose is simple, direct and engaging. To answer the ever-present of why society should support universities in producing liberally educated persons, as opposed to preparing students for a career, he pithily summarizes the value of liberal education for both the individual as well as the larger society:

At its best, liberal education produces a critical cast of mind, including habits of circumspection and open-mindedness and a deep concern for argument and evidence. An educated person wants first to understand. Educated people always approach things in the spirit of investigation, even if their ultimate concern is to reform what they find.

Moreover, educated persons and the habits they acquire provide a social good. Ultimately, the intellectual habits of mind are not only crucial for democratic governance but are habits that "make us all better citizens, parents, neighbours, co-workers and friends."

Some of the evergreen topics Mercer tackles include preferential hiring, freedom of expression, academic freedom, inclusivity, academic values, indigenous ways of knowing, reasonable accommodation and human rights, and pseudo-science and the university. Mercer touches on most of the hot-button topics on the contemporary campus, and this collection provides a knowing picture of the state of the modern Canadian university.

The “Dangerous University” of the book’s title stems from the author’s belief that liberal study should challenge students’ beliefs and biases. He takes aim at what might be called “The Sunday School” version of the university, which holds that today’s university should perform the same function as the Sunday School of previous generations, namely, to imbue students with the right attitudes and understandings to ensure that vice is punished and virtue rewarded.

Like their Sunday Schools predecessors, universities have become morally fastidious and intolerant of opposing views, institutions where rigid, ideological purity tests unrelated to truth or excellence are applied to all and sundry. Discourse is heavily policed in order to identify and shame the heretic, the non-believer or the apostate. However much the lessons might differ between the Sunday Schools of yore and the contemporary campus, the intended effect is the same: indoctrinating young people with the correct opinions to make the world a better place. Accordingly, the campus should be a safe space where students are socialized into the dominant mores and ethos of their age. Or to put the matter bluntly, universities should indoctrinate rather than educate.

Among the unhappy outcomes of heavily policed discourse and semantic sensitivity is that the university has been transformed into an institution dominated by a climate of fear. Offence is used as a weapon. The moral posturing of the aggrieved, from colleagues to undergraduates, means that professors self-censor out of a sense of preservation. For those who violate progressive pieties, accusations stand in for due process. We live in denunciatory times, and progressive orthodoxy morphs into institutional cowardice.

One of the more sinister aspects of this new dispensation is the proliferation of speech codes which seek to regulate campus conduct—codes which almost invariably involve the twisting of the meaning of words in university documents. For example, Mercer takes exception to the ubiquitous injunction

that we need to be “respectful” when we engage in free and open discussions in our classes. As he notes, “... as found in university documents [respect] is taking on a new meaning, a meaning in tension with respect as a concern to treat others as intellectually and morally autonomous agents.”

Firstly, as he points out, the word is unnecessary for those who have internalized the demands of academic discourse. If we sincerely try to understand another’s ideas, “we will unbiddenly listen attentively to each other’s ideas and criticisms.” But when university officials direct us to respect others, they intend us to “be careful about people’s feelings and identities ... [which] might require that we keep our opinions to ourselves or that we dissemble.” Such speech codes are an instance of infantilization, for “When we are engaged in academic pursuits, we will treat people respectfully and don’t need to be told to do so.”

Today’s topsy-turvy version of the university is a parody of what a university should be and the sorts of intellectual virtues that a university should seek to instill in its students. By contrast, “getting it right” means that students’ beliefs, along with those of the larger society, must be held to account and challenged. No eighteen-year-old enters university fully formed, just as nothing in our social world should be beyond question or scrutiny. Getting it right necessitates the freedom for both students and professors to speak openly and candidly without fear or censure, let alone to be subject to the opprobrium that so often accompanies the articulation of unpopular or “offensive” views: “University students should be free from the threat of institutional censure to state any opinion they wish and to state their opinions using whatever language they wish.”

The essays capably guide us through the plethora of competing visions for the university and the perennial questions necessitated by higher education. How do universities differ from professional, vocational or trade schools? What do we

expect university students to learn? What should students expect in exchange for a serious financial commitment and years of study? How should university classes be conducted? What should be on the curriculum? These are not easy questions, and reasonable people can differ.

Mercer full-throatically rejects the notion, now quite common, that universities should be microcosms of the larger society reflecting the racial and ethnic diversity of the citizenry. This he calls a “pernicious idea ... with just enough surface plausibility for it to have gained traction on campuses across the world and thereby to have begun to change universities for the worse.” Instead, universities are places where people gather to live “the life of the mind” with all that that entails, in particular, “teaching, scholarship, research, discussion and debate.” He is explicit in his warning:

Canadian universities are not, in any interesting sense, microcosms of our diverse, multicultural Canadian society. The more universities seek to become like the society around them, the less they will be spaces in which students and professors will be able to live the life of the mind.

The question for thoughtful critics is whether Canada’s universities can be reformed or whether they have passed the point of no return. Some high-profile critics maintain it is the latter, and believe that we should be developing new institutions and new models of higher education rather than pursuing a hopeless cause.

When measuring our universities against the academic values universally acknowledged only a few years ago, it is easy to yield to the temptation of hopelessness. It is to Prof. Mercer’s credit that he never gives in to such despair. His essays evince a balanced judgement and measured insight, and he engages in neither a gloomy pessimism nor an unfounded optimism. Rather, he articulates and defends an ancient vision of the university and liberal learning, one that Canadians

abandon at their peril.

For Mercer, liberal learning frees us from the contingencies of our birth. It enables the individual to break free from the claustrophobia of their own existence and behold and appreciate the astonishing reality of the world. It serves the broader society insofar as citizens understand the need for a politics that values argument, evidence and openness to dialogue and debate. And for those who have been privileged to enter it, the life of the mind is a world that is a source of great satisfaction and endless learning. In sum, Dr. Mercer argues that universities should fundamentally be invested in producing liberally educated people, an ideal that is, throughout these thoughtful essays, abundantly on display.

[\[*\]](#) The systematic and deleterious alterations to the Canadian academic landscape are capably summarized by [Margaret Wente](#).

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