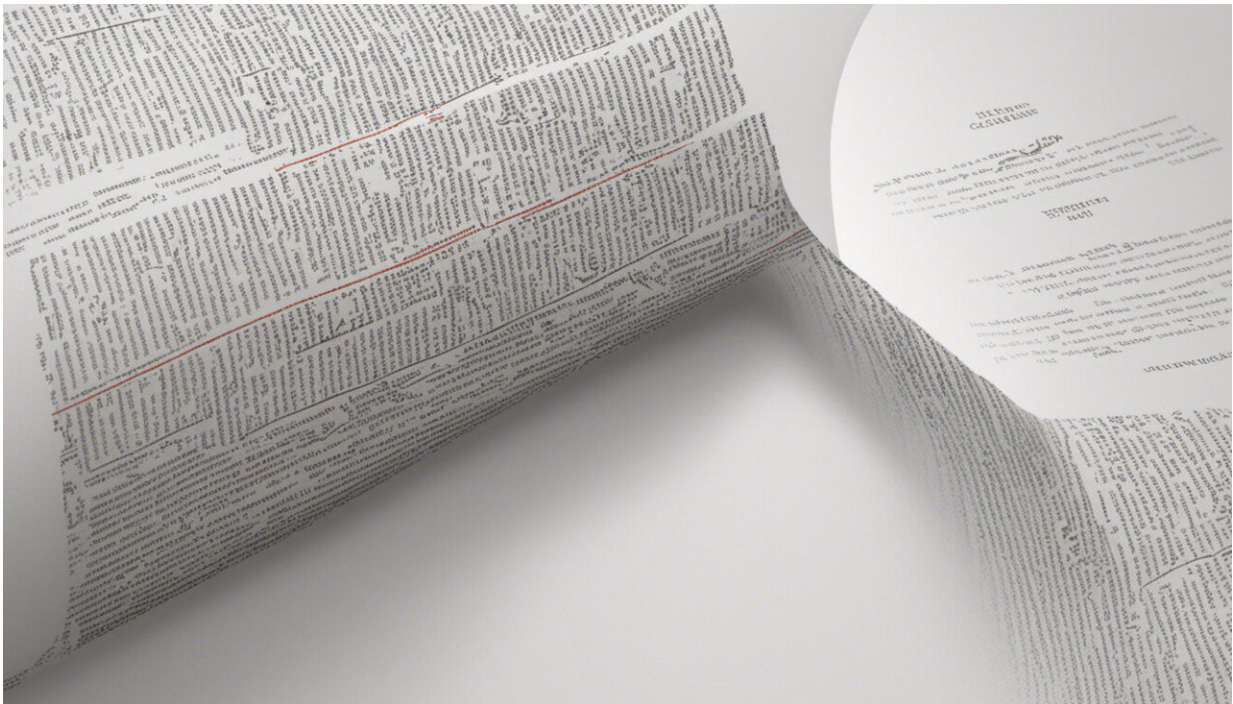


Criticisms of academic freedom miss the mark and risk the integrity of scholarship

September 2 2022, by Marc Spooner



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In the era of today's heated culture wars, the concepts of academic freedom and freedom of expression have become increasingly conflated. Divisive political debates around critical race theory, [Québec's Bill 32](#) and talk of establishing "[free speech guardians](#)" are just some recent examples. Academic freedom is being subsumed into the oftentimes

polarizing rhetoric concerning what is commonly referred to as free speech.

But the two are different. Free speech is about the right to express one's opinion, however accurate, false, good or bad it might be.

Academic [freedom](#) requires professional competency as determined by disciplinary communities. It is most succinctly defined by the [American Association of University Professors' 1915 statement](#) as, "freedom of inquiry and research; freedom of teaching within the university or college; and freedom of extramural utterance and action."

This is what makes laws like Québec's Bill 32 problematic. It further confuses the distinction between freedom of speech and academic freedom. Bill 32 is troubling because it grants the government special powers to dictate what happens in university classrooms. That [risks undermining](#) the very principles of academic freedom its proponents are purportedly trying to protect.

Academic freedom—and the corresponding protections of tenure—are often portrayed by conservative politicians and spokespersons as a [luxury perk](#) demanded by professors looking for a cushy frill few others enjoy. That kind of narrative might be convenient fodder for populists trying to gain support for their own agendas, but is the need for academic freedom really all that unusual?

The truth is that, while academic freedom itself might sound like a unique notion, granting special tools or rights to specific professions is rather commonplace.

Work-specific considerations are common

In order to effectively carry out the duties, tasks and responsibilities of

one's employment, workers in many fields are granted special access or consideration to otherwise publicly restricted tools, working conditions or rights.

Take occupations like sport, [law enforcement](#), farming, journalism and more. In sport, [hockey players](#) are permitted to hit each other, and even fight within the game without fear of being arrested. Similarly, boxers may punch each other. Police and other agents of the state are permitted to carry and, under certain conditions, discharge a variety of weapons which would otherwise be restricted or banned. At the extreme end of this spectrum are of course soldiers who are not only permitted, but expected to shoot, kill or bomb so deemed enemies.

Farmers may access large quantities of fertilizer and other restricted materials that are [otherwise regulated](#). Medical personnel administer a variety of drugs that are tightly controlled. Elected federal and provincial members of Parliament and legislative assemblies may speak freely in their respective chambers [without fear of prosecution or civil liability](#) for any comments they make. Journalists [cannot be forced to reveal their sources](#).

It doesn't require much imagination to see how the jobs above, without special considerations, would quickly become absurd, inefficient and even dangerous. Consider how boxing without hitting becomes dancing. Farming would be much less productive absent often necessary herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers. Medicine far less effective and more deadly without access to lifesaving drugs and procedures. Journalists would be incapable of investigating the happenings of the day if their sources were not guaranteed protections.

In each case above, considerations are earned and granted in recognition that these working conditions are needed to carry out work effectively and efficiently. When placed in this context, academic freedom is

neither unique nor unreasonable.

Dangerous precedents

Unless we want academic scholarship to suffer, academics must be free to research and speak without fearing they will upset powerful interests. If academics become unable to practice their scholarship because they might upset wealthy private donors, corporations, a populist mob or even the government of the day, it would signal a dangerous shift.

We need only look at [Nancy Olivieri's case](#) to see what can go wrong when powerful interests violate a researcher's academic freedom.

Dr. Olivieri raised concerns about an experimental drug she was researching to treat [thalassemia](#). She found that the drug, deferiprone, could potentially cause serious complications. The pharmaceutical company warned her not to publish her results and tried to silence her while the university and hospital failed to protect her. Despite the [lack of support and legal threats, Dr. Olivieri published her findings](#).

If it were not for [her exemplary integrity and bravery](#), patients involved in her trials, and countless others, may have been placed in harm's way.

That is why academics and researchers require academic freedom. The need for academic freedom is not about elitist professors frivolously seeking privileges while breathing rarefied air in their ivory towers. It is simply the commonplace and understandable request of workers asking for the conditions they need to competently and effectively carry out their duties as expected, required and urgently needed by society.

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