

Statement on Academic Freedom at Williams College

The historical trajectory of eugenics in the academy has emerged as an exemplar in our discussion of academic freedom and the value of debate. I do think a discussion of eugenics can help elucidate the stakes and mechanisms of academic freedom at the college, but my concern is that thus far our discussion has suffered from a tense problem. When exactly did eugenics fall from grace? There is presently a class action lawsuit being litigated against the Royal University Hospital in Saskatchewan for forcibly sterilizing over 60 Native women in the past 20 years, some as recently as 2017. These violences are perpetuated by well-regarded professionals, not some renegade remnants of a scientific past. I think the question is not was it rational discourse or Kuhnian paradigm shifts that banished eugenics from our contemporary scientific and medical landscape, but rather, what conditions have allowed us to imagine that eugenics is a thing of the past and to so easily dismiss it? Why are we all largely in agreement that certain forms of speech and knowledge, like eugenics, are not academically justifiable (also antisemitism, statements made by klu-klux-klan members, or even anti-vaxers or climate change denialists), while others we imagine are a function of controversial politics (trans-exclusionary feminists, “conservative” politicians and talking heads who have aligned themselves with white nationalists, apologists and perpetrators of (neo)colonialism, etc...) and deserve the protection of academic freedom?

In asking these questions, my intent is not to point out the various levels of privilege that go into being attuned to some problems and not others. We all have blind-spots. We are all trained through personal experience and scholarly perspective to highlight certain questions and axes above others. Indeed, there is no other way to produce scholarship and think critically about the vastness of the world (or even the local) before us. However, in observing the world, we do

not actually separate ourselves from it. While we may say that eugenics is not a scientifically valid field, that does not mean that we are sheltering our students or ourselves from living it, or that we have exorcised the genealogical remnants of the field in other intellectual traditions. My family has been profoundly altered by eugenics policies, even in my generation, and that will remain a fact regardless of its academic standing. Our ability to shelter is far more limited than I think any of us would like to admit.

This is the conceit of “safe spaces”— that they shelter students from engaging ideas and people with whom they fundamentally disagree, resulting in overly coddled and narrowminded liberal college atmosphere. It is against this imaginary safe space that the Chicago statement was written. However, their students are no safer than ours, even if the boundaries drawn around University of Chicago are literally maintained through a militarized police force. Neither I nor my trans colleagues or students need to debate an anti-trans thinker (of the conservative or liberal variety) to be intimately familiar with the content of their argument or the policies that emanate from them. Those debates are already written on my body, my legal record, and in the ways in which my freedom to exist and move freely is curtailed every day. The same can be said for survivors of sexual assault being forced to witness debates about consent, black Williams community members tolerating explicitly anti-black sentiments from speakers at Williams and in the broader Williamstown community, or any number of our students, faculty, and staff who either immigrated or come from immigrant families from the global south, who have had to (as recently as this past semester) listen to invited speakers discuss the moral good of colonialism. None of these arguments are ones we haven’t had to encounter and internalize many times over. Supposing that we as a community have been sheltered from these issues makes the white, upper middleclass subject the presumed norm, which is increasingly not the case at Williams and

elsewhere. For students, faculty, and staff who do not fit that norm, the issue will never be one of disagreement or mere discomfort. You cannot disagree with a person or an ideology that dehumanizes and encourages violence against you. You can only resist. If the most vulnerable members our community are the most likely to continually engage and take in these ideologies that we fear banning in the academy, then who exactly are safe spaces protecting?

I am extremely grateful and proud to have joined the Williams community, and I have found it to be an exceptionally friendly, intellectually rigorous, and supportive institution. And still, it is not a safe space for me. It is an institution built on the genocide of my ancestors and the suppression of the political sovereignty of my nation in the present, and it is located within a settler political landscape that threatens to kill, violate, and erase me and my loved ones. In reality, there are no safe spaces for me and for many, many of our peers. That being said, I believe part of our problem is that there are many well-meaning allies who believe that safe spaces can be made, and, in an attempt to do so, have tried to bar us from engaging anything at all problematic or traumatic. I think we've come to call this "cancel culture." The problem is that this shutting down energy so often ends up being misdirected, channeling anger and fear at faculty and students of color, who are engaged in the hard work of interrogating, expressing, and establishing expertise on these often traumatic and troubled topics. Of course, I can't help but think of the recent cancellation of *Beast Thing*, as we debate the merits of academic freedom, all the while notably neglecting to make a strong statement supporting black, brown, and queer faculty and artists, who are far more likely than the more commonly conjured white, conservative provocateur to bear the consequences of saying that which cannot be said politely.

It is my belief that we do need an explicit statement on academic freedom and our understanding of the kind of space Williams should be. It is only with this kind of structure and

mutual contract that a greater number of faculty and students can bear that weight alongside us and take ownership of concepts and interactions in which they are also implicated. Rather than be distracted by whether or not we should give a platform to bigots, or kowtowing to liberal versus conservative rhetoric on campus, we should focus instead on giving students the skills to properly process and speak out on these issues in a way that is productive and opening up, not reductive and shutting down. We need fewer protests and cancellations, and a greater number of initiatives and spaces of mutual support and creation. We have taken it upon ourselves to be leaders on questions of institutional diversity. Why not extend this to the question of academic freedom that results, too? I would like to offer three suggestions for language and provisions in a Williams statement on academic freedom:

1. Brave spaces, not safe spaces

We are not the first community to have this debate in the wake of the Chicago statement, and there is no need for us to reinvent the terms of the conversation. Scholars, largely black feminist theorists and activists, have offered “brave space” as an alternative to “safe space,” a term that has at best lost its meaning and at worst become an actively harmful and silencing concept. Brave spaces are sites where students will be exposed to discussions that will make them uncomfortable, either because they are afraid to misstep, disagree with the content, or because there is a lot of traumatic and dehumanizing material to cover in our classrooms. This is reminiscent of the uncomfortable learning so valorized by proponents of the Chicago statement. However, bravery is not an unlimited resource, nor is it one that can exist without supports and training. Many of us have been trained to be brave, because being an expert affords no small amount of armor. Education is far less raw and terrifying from the faculty side of it. Our students do not have that protection. Brave spaces require explicit and mutual ground rules and the

opportunity to disengage if absolutely necessary. We tacitly use many of these ground rules in the first place— we expect students not to attack each other personally in class, we ensure that mistakes will be corrected with kindness and not mockery, etc.... Constructing a brave space requires that we not only make ground rules, but that when these rules are transgressed, we interrogate them, locate their cadence in a wider network of knowledge, and refuse to allow the lack of safety to expound upon the silence of voices this institution was not built hear. Brave spaces call on us as educators to be explicit in justifying why certain materials and speakers are given a platform. We expect that students will give us the benefit of the doubt in exchange. This pedagogy means we can no longer simply rehearse the topics that cause discomfort. We need to do something with them. It is not enough to expose and diagnose. We must, as Peter James Hudson writes, “always already demand practical activities of resistance, encounter, and anti-colonial thinking.”

2. Presumption of incomplete knowledge

We need to accept that the metric of what qualifies as legitimate academic discourse is not self-evident and is changing. There are obvious lines we know not to cross, and there are certain standards of evidence that we agree upon, but there are others to which only some of us (hopefully!) will be attuned. Part of our job in creating a brave space is committing to interrogating what we might not see, seeking out and supporting the expertise of our colleagues, and making it clear to students that this is what is happening. Again, modeling deliberation can help us shift from a cancel impulse to one of discussion and solidarity, which can include all manner of collective action. I would like to see fewer faculty step back and justify this by saying that they do not want to take up space in debates they feel do not concern them. Rather, I would like my colleagues to model to students what it looks like to deal with that discomfort, and to engage and think critically anyway. It is not feasible nor desirable to allow “only factual talks,”

nor is it acceptable to invite speakers whose core philosophy is the extermination of members of our community in some misguided attempt to toughen up our students. These two extremes are not mutually exclusive, nor can they be located on a linear axis, and neither of them encompass the vast majority of materials or people we need and want to engage.

3. Shift focus from uncomfortable content to methodology

As I have said, we are all subject to engaging these arguments and people in the world.

Censorship at Williams should be used in cases where even unintentionally lending our support and authority to a speaker or argument would be unconscionable due to the violence or harm that could ensue. Beyond that, much of our job is to teach students how to not only encounter these arguments, but how to master them. We need to teach students where these discourses come from, how they thrive, how to break them down into their smallest parts and lay them bare. This can be done in a number of ways depending on which part of the curriculum you teach, but overall, the idea is not to subject our students to exposure therapy in some (oddly gendered) attempt to make them harder. I wish I could say that our students are too comfortable. They aren't. They are either too afraid or on-guard. They are anxious, and feel like they are drowning, both here and in the world at large. They are not suffering from a lack of exposure to content. If we focus instead on skills, self-empowerment or introspection, and constructive critique when we bring in these materials or people to the table that are otherwise subject to cancelation, I think we will find students who are far more interested in engaging. Many faculty know from experience how a source of pain or horror can morph into a source of strength through scholarship. I would like to share that transformation with my students. Speaking from experience, every time I have given students the opportunity to disengage from a difficult topic

after telling them why I believe it is important I present that topic anyway, not one student has ever taken me up on that offer.

Students are on high alert right now. Many of us have noticed this. Honestly, we all are. It is not an easy time to do what we do. The supposed conceptual divide between different dominant ways of knowing, political ideologies, and bodies of knowledge seems exceptionally wide right now. That is exactly because of the work many of us have been doing for decades (and backlashes to it), and it is no time to stop now, nor to suppose that the space made in unsafe institutions has come at the expense of perpetrators and apologists of violence. Like eugenics, they are still in the present tense and we have no choice but to suffer them. It is not my goal to make Williams a safe space. It is my goal to make it a space where I can securely teach my students how to resist, how to imagine safe futures, and how to bolster the strongest arguments and actions possible in the face of all that makes safety impossible. Even for those who are more concerned with the fact that students resist discomfort or that we are not engaging conservative thought, I think we can agree that focusing on modeling, methodological training, and interrogating academic truisms is a good place to start. We should continue this conversation and draft a statement that is unique to Williams and inclusive of the students we claim to protect.

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