



The Wednesday Communiqué

September 26, 2022

Ideas

I gave a talk in a totalitarian nation once, it does not matter where, but at the time the state was actively suppressing the teaching of certain ideas in their universities and actively suppressing ethnic minorities. One of the major themes of my talk was how making – the making of art and of tools, specifically – was the defining feature of humans as a species. I noted how the over-focus on tools to the exclusion of arts could lead to societies that could not solve social problems. A student rose at the end to challenge me, claiming that all the greatest ideas of humanity were to be found in science. I agreed that there were indeed great ideas to be found in the sciences. And then I said that socially provocative ideas, the dangerous ideas that are met with imprisonment and suppression in his own nation and others, come from the humanities, political and philosophical thought, and the arts. Even Galileo was imprisoned not for his scientific ideas per se, but for challenging the authority of the Pope. At a university where thought was under siege, discussing how ideas engender social transformation felt precarious and volatile. I became very aware of the official video cameras that were capturing every moment of the event. I've followed the continued suppression of ideas there, and I don't think I could give that talk today.

Attacking a talk on our Albuquerque campus last week, social media called on the university to “shut it down.” At the same time, other channels called on the university to punish protesters and stop their protest. Some emphasized that if the university shut the event down it would be pushing the United States into becoming a totalitarian state. Others asserted, with equal fervor, that if we did *not* shut it down, we would be pushing the United States into becoming a totalitarian state.

I say that ideas can cause harm. And then I say too that our only defense against such harm is through protecting the freedom of all to express ideas and to challenge them through speech and non-violent protest. This is a principle central to the American university. Cruel speech should be met with other speech in its many forms: editorials, signs, research, chants, dance . . . taking a stand, but not suppression or prevention. The best counter to bad ideas remains better ideas. The exchange of ideas makes transformation possible. All can speak, anyone can listen, and anyone can choose not to listen. But the quelling of ideas is counterproductive, as repressed ideas live on in the shadows, unexamined and unchallenged.

“*What do you think?*” To protect the asking of that question and the opportunity to answer it without coercion is one of our most crucial collective tasks at UNM. It is certainly my job as provost. If someone seizes the power to prevent the presentation of thought, to restrict speech, that power will ultimately be used to suppress the most vulnerable. We should be wary of repeating this history. As but one example, the Sedition Act of 1918 was used to censor the views of many Americans, especially pacifists and socialists. The act suppressed knowledge of the 1918 Flu Pandemic, providing a gap of information and leaving millions unprepared for its onslaught.

I think that a university community cannot honestly believe in the value of ideas if its leaders prevent their expression. What do you think?

Leaders

At UNM, academic leaders are critical to shaping the intellectual environment, and so I am pleased to announce the on-going formation of search advisory committees for the Chancellor of UNM-Gallup and for the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The search advisory committee for the Chancellor will be chaired by Professor John Zimmerman, Division Chair of Fine Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at UNM-G, while the search advisory committee for the Dean of Arts & Sciences will be chaired by Professor Eric Lau, Dean of the Honors College and Dean of University College here in Albuquerque. The search advisory committees assist me in evaluating candidates for these important positions, and so play a critical role in shaping the futures of UNM. With our current positive trajectory, that future will be bright.

I would be grateful for nominations (including self-nominations) for members of these search advisory committees. Please share your thoughts at provost@unm.edu. Thanks!

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