

# Academe Online

## Academic Freedom vs. Community Values?

*Should campus events reflect Utah Valley's community moral standards? Political standards? Sexual standards?*

By David R. Keller

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A frequent refrain in Utah County, which prides itself on being one of the most conservative communities in the country, is that its public institution of higher education, Utah Valley State College, should reflect "community values." Generally, the argument goes something like this: local taxpayers, who support the school, should not have to tolerate events that fail to reflect the common morality. This includes events involving invited speakers.

The Center for the Study of Ethics, which I have the honor of directing, invites outside speakers to campus as a central part of its programming. The center's focus on the academic study of ethics makes it unique in the Utah system of higher education. It facilitates both faculty research and public forums, which bring students, faculty, administrators, staff, and community members into dialogue on public policy issues, which, by definition, are controversial.

Unfortunately, off-campus intervention into the organization of these forums has become increasingly problematic. As stakeholders in UVSC, community members have exercised a growing sense of entitlement to intercede in college operations. The interference began with invited speakers but expanded to affect curriculum development and even the hiring and retention of faculty.

In the [September–October 2005 issue of \*Academe\*](#), I wrote about the controversy that occurred after filmmaker Michael Moore was invited to speak at UVSC in 2004. The center itself did not invite Moore (he doesn't fit our academically oriented repertoire), yet the problems raised by the Moore imbroglio extend across campus. In a county where the approval rating for President Bush and the Iraq war are highest in the nation, many citizens wondered at the time why they had to endure Moore's anti-Bush diatribe on the campus of a publicly supported institution just two weeks prior to a presidential election.

### A Little History

The anger that accompanies this issue must be understood in historical context. Tension between the college and the community has intensified over recent decades as UVSC's mission and makeup have rapidly and radically changed. UVSC originated in the 1930s as a vocational-technical school that, after several other name changes, became Utah Technical College at Provo in 1967 and Utah Valley Community College in 1987. Six years later, the school began offering a small number of baccalaureate degrees and was renamed UVSC. Now UVSC offers nearly five dozen baccalaureate degrees. Earlier this year, legislation was passed changing UVSC's name to Utah Valley University, effective July 1, 2008.

UVSC's history also includes a shifting relationship with the only other institution of higher education in Utah County, Mormon-owned Brigham Young University. In the past, if a Utah County high school student, regardless of religion, wanted a traditional baccalaureate liberal arts education, BYU was the place to go. Students who wanted vocational training came to us. But over the past fifteen years, BYU has implemented increasingly rigid expectations of obedience to ecclesiastical authority, which resulted in AAUP censure of its administration in 1998 for violations of academic freedom and due process. This climate makes the university attractive only to a select group of Latter-day Saints faithful. The responsibility to the community for open, public, secular education rests squarely on UVSC's shoulders.

Although UVSC began as a vocational-technical institute, the changes at BYU and other demographic trends have led to expectations that UVSC should also provide solid liberal education—that is, an education that frees or "liberates" students from ignorance, dogma, and prejudice so that they can assume the duties and responsibilities of engaged citizens in a democracy.

Unfortunately, many area taxpayers see the transition from vocational to liberal education as undesirable. Many Utahans believe that you go to church for moral guidance and you go to UVSC for job training. But liberal education involves questioning, which many residents fear will eat at the glue that binds the community together. This attitude, I believe, is the subtext to a former state legislator's warning in the June 6, 2005, issue of the *Orem Daily Herald* that UVSC is suffering from a "disturbing drift to the left" in the aftermath of the Moore uproar.

Surprisingly, the dispute over Moore did not dissipate with the departure of his limousine to the airport or even the victory of George W. Bush. The president of the Utah state senate, in whose hometown UVSC is located, echoed the sentiment of many of his constituents when he told the *College Times* on November 21, 2005, that "what we need to have happen is not a repeat of what happened at this institution in the last couple of years. This institution reflects the values of the community in which it resides. And if we have continual efforts to try [to] move this institution away from the values of this community, we are going to have some problems up at the state capital."

## What Values?

References to the "values of the community" may slide easily off the tongue of some, but such values are difficult to define. Even the most homogeneous communities are intrinsically diverse. To privilege one set of values to the exclusion of others directly contradicts the ideal of American pluralism. Nevertheless, the obsession with adherence to community values does not stop with speakers invited to campus.

In an e-mail circulated campus-wide in 1999, one UVSC faculty member expressed concern about the "abuse of . . . students' values" in general education humanities courses that address an array of diverse ideas. The implication was that exposure to alternative viewpoints could corrupt students' potentially fragile values. The flashpoint for this faculty member was gay rights, but the pedagogical point applies equally to other divisive issues such as capital punishment, gun control, immigration policy, feminism, public policy on the environment, biodiversity, the connection or disconnection between ethics and religion, global warming, militarism, the rights of property owners, the separation of church and state—that is, a substantial chunk of the curriculum. Parents, faculty, citizens, and political leaders assert that alternative positions on some of these issues are incompatible with "community values" and that, like the melody of the Pied Piper, exposure to ideas, in prose or person, could lead students astray.

Perhaps most disturbing is the impact on faculty affairs of this obsession with using "community values" as a normative standard. An individual who tried to bribe UVSC with \$25,000 to cancel Moore's invitation to campus also proclaimed in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on December 9, 2004 that taxpayers who aim to inculcate conservative values in their children should not be paying the salaries of "liberal" professors who undermine those very values.

In this vein, several faculty members known for endorsing the ideals of liberal education and pluralism, myself included, received an anonymous letter dated January 1, 2006, stating: "Eventually, people with a strong Left-wing orientation . . . will leave UVSC because the community will not abide them. They will realize that they cannot be happy here. And like it or not, the community—especially this one—calls the shots." The passive-aggressive anonymity of this ultimatum says more than its either-shut-your-mouth-or-get-out-of-town message: topics on which "the community" has issued its edict are not open for discussion. Period.

At an April 2005 symposium titled "Finding Common Ground: A Dialogue on Academic Freedom and Responsibility," the aforementioned former state legislator accused Roger Bowen, former general secretary of the AAUP, of leading an organization that has become out of touch with mainstream America by hiding behind the mantle of academic freedom and failing to endorse the so-called Academic Bill of Rights advocated by neoconservative activist David Horowitz. Bowen rejoined, appropriately, that the AAUP simply upholds the principles of academic freedom that individuals of all political orientations in an open society should endorse, "conservatives" included.

## Different Tack

Through all of this, I have learned —to my surprise—that students from conservative backgrounds are deeply offended by the notion that they have to be protected. My students reported that they overwhelmingly planned to vote for Bush, but they all wanted to see Michael Moore. Perhaps a universal trait of teenagers is that they want to be respected and treated like adults. My students expressed dismay that a self-appointed protectorate of “community values” would attempt to shield them from invited speakers, ideas, and even particular professors.

I also now direct the ethics center differently. I used to go out of my way to invite popular conservative speakers who could pack a room but whose academic credentials were, frankly, suspect. Now I feel guilty that I compromised my academic ideals to buy the approval of conservative critics. I no longer have any interest in achieving their definition of “balance.” For them, anything left of the radical right will always be “liberal”—one such speaker invited to campus is one too many.

Because of my former zeal to appease local conservatives, they have difficulty claiming that the center harbors a “liberal” agenda. To my astonishment, the college president informed me this spring that critics now allege that the center is “too academic,” which, given the fact that we serve an institution of higher education, seems like criticizing champion bicyclist Lance Armstrong for being too athletic.

I suspect that the criticisms of the center and my department’s general education ethics course stem from the fact that we probe, criticize, and question, not unlike Socrates, and in doing so earn many powerful enemies. These detractors would prefer leadership programs that cheerlead, in pep-rally fashion, for their chosen set of “values” rather than participate in critical and nuanced thinking about pressing public policy issues.

My recent experience has also persuaded me that public institutions of higher education must remain true and faithful to their indispensable role in an open, democratic, pluralistic society. Although we must acknowledge and respect the unique values of the students we serve in order to create a healthy learning atmosphere, we must not be held hostage to political expediency. Achieving this balance is hard, especially for institutions in relatively homogeneous, traditionalist communities. Such colleges and universities face challenges that other institutions around the country may not face. We must be sensitive to varied and deeply rooted community values, but we must also respond to the demands of the people who fund the school and whom the school serves. This is especially difficult in a place like Utah County, where tolerance of diversity has limits.

At the same time, in order to be recognized as an authentic institution of higher education, schools like UVSC must adhere to national academic standards, so that a degree from the school is acknowledged as legitimate from Maine to California and from Washington to Florida. Interference by political forces outside the academy is not the answer. The solution, rather, is trust and respect among the public for professional educators, a trust and respect that has been sorely lacking in Utah County.

Oddly, the people who endeavor to dictate UVSC’s academic program—invited speakers, curriculum, and faculty hiring and retention—with appeals to “community values” are the same people who, one would think, would be most adamant about upholding the Jeffersonian ideal of a well-educated citizenry. Perhaps those who wish to frame the academic programs of public institutions of higher education in terms of “community values” are the ones who stand to benefit most from liberal education—that is, to be liberated from their ignorance about the role of public education in pluralistic, open societies.

It’s tough being purple in a community that’s redder than a fire engine. Although I grew up in Utah and come from a family whose ancestors were original Mormon pioneers, I often think that I would fit in better in Berkeley, Boulder, or Boston. But then I relish the thought that I am more needed here than there, that the importance of defenders of the ideals of liberal education is directly proportional to the antagonism we endure.

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