

Alpha Chi National Honor Society Forum on Academic Freedom

Tuesday, November 9, 2004, 7:00 p.m., Hiner Hall, Science Hall

Summary of Key Questions and Comments

Panelists: Dr. Ann McPherran (Moderator), Dr. Jerry Smith, Dr. Wayne Priest, Mr. Dwight Simon (student). Questions were posed both by the moderator and the audience.

Question: I am wondering if each of you would describe the concept “academic freedom” and help us understand why there is such a strong feeling about the concept on a college campus like ours.

Panelist: There are two aspects that are of interest. One, which involves students, which I think is probably more of a consumer concern. The second is for faculty, which is where historically academic concerns have been involved. With faculty there are three different aspects of academic freedom. One is the ability to be able to do research and publication without threat of that research or publication coming back to threaten employment with the institution. The second relates to which classroom discussions and topics are appropriate for the disciplines that one is teaching in. That, of course, involves students. There is a nexus there. The third is for the appropriateness of being able to speak publicly about issues without it being a threat to one’s employment.

Panelist: I conceptualize academic freedom as the right of a group, usually teachers and students, to speak freely about a subject matter and to entertain a plethora of ideas, theories, and positions that relate to the subject matter, and to critically think about how these topics interrelate, how they might be applied, and what their ultimate consequences might be. Sometimes the goal of academic freedom is different for Christian institutions as compared to secular institutions: this is the freedom to be able to think critically, to understand God’s world, and figure out how best we can serve Him, and how best we can do His bidding if you will. I think that we ought to be able to critically inquire in order to do that. I think it is imperative that we do that.

Panelist: My initial reaction when people start talking about academic freedom is to get a little nervous because I have been trained that when people throw such terms around they may be trying to put something over. It is important to see that it is not an end. It is not something that we can hold up as an end. It is a means—a means to seeking truth. This happens within an academic community and it is very important. There is a sense on the part of some people that if you go to a Christian college you are just throwing yourself into an indoctrination program or an academic environment that somehow is cheapened or lessened or isn’t as respected or isn’t doing the weighty academic work people are doing at Duke or somewhere else. Academic freedom is very important in an institution like this because in the Statement of Faith and the Mission Statement, Huntington College is upfront about what their values are. We can engage in open questions and disagreements whereas at some institutions, even secular institutions, you can’t necessarily do that. Seen in perspective, it is not indoctrination, but it is an education and a seeking of truth and doing it in an open way. At the end of the day being able to come back and say that I have learned these core truths and I think that is why it is so important, at least for some of the students I talk to.

Question: At an institution like Huntington College, I have also heard the term academic responsibility used in conjunction with academic freedom. How do those two terms work together in a Christian environment that we are in?

Panelist: Freedom isn’t license, at least healthy freedom isn’t. C. S. Lewis has an idea of what hell is like and he suggests that hell is where people can do just what they want to do and everybody hits. So they end up abusing each other out of license. Healthy freedom is freedom that has limits, freedom that has responsibilities.

Panelist: The RED BOOK is the standard for academic freedom adopted by the American Association of University Professors and the Association of American Colleges. Huntington College adopted most of that statement as part of our *Manual of Operations*. Faculty have the freedom to talk about issues, to introduce into the classroom material that relevant to the discipline, but not matters that are irrelevant to it. Furthermore, at Huntington, faculty are expected to support the Statement of Faith. There is a responsibility, that I think in support of academic freedom, to provide an education to students that explores issues and some of which are controversial.

Panelist: The Philosophy of Education and the Statement of Faith and the college's mission provide a sort of framework of responsibility. I like the idea of not talking about it as limits, but are we responsibly engaging the Philosophy of Education?. The Philosophy of Education is not talked about enough and maybe it is something that should be talked about in an ongoing way, not just when it is threatened or when it is a problem. Maybe we should do this more often.

Question: **Is there a place where a line should be drawn? This is a Christian college. We fully support academic freedom, but Huntington College would not support having the entire science department being run by Muslims. What standard do we use to decide where to draw the line?**

Panelist: What I would start with is what we say in our statement that faculty, trustees, and administration endorse or support our statement of academic freedom: the line is our Statement of Faith. It is in that area that we have agreed that we don't have a possibility of going in a different direction. Let me give an example. One of the statements is that we believe in the Trinity, in God as a Triune God. We don't have freedom at Huntington to teach that Unitarianism is equally valid.

Question: **Can you give me some sort of a summary why I, as a student, should be interested in academic freedom? What does this contribute to my education as a student at the College?**

Panelist: I think that one important thing is that academic freedom is not just for professors, but for students; professors are not the only ones seeking truth here. If a student has a certain view or beliefs, will a professor knock that down or will that be ostracized or the student not even be allowed into the discussion?

Panelist: Did you want to come to this College to be indoctrinated? Or to have everything you believe in destroyed? I think no one wants either one of those so we look for a balance. How can you be challenged to grow, to learn, and to know how other folks believe and yet also still have some kind of foundation?

Panelist: As a student you have an interest in being sure that you are getting an education and that it is possible for you to explore ideas and issues in that education without constraints. Students possibly have far less constraints on them in this pursuit of truth than faculty. The crucial point for students is the ability to be able to explore issues without feeling that the faculty member will penalize you for your ideas. The faculty member has an obligation, particularly in a Christian college, to help you to see the whole picture, to be able to see a perspective of a synthesis of Christian values that is appropriate so that you cannot dismiss things that the College and the faculty feel are important. feels is important and the faculty would feel is important

Question: **In relationship to academic freedom, what are the goals of the institution?**

Panelist: Well, let me tell you what our mission is and then I will tell you whether or not I agree. The *Huntington College Catalogue*, page 5, reads: *The College's mission is to develop in students a commitment to scholarship, to educate you broadly, for a life of morale spiritual integrity, to equip students for a variety of vocations, and to help develop your abilities for a life of God-honoring service.* Given that this is a liberal arts college and not a Bible college, one of my most important jobs is to help you learn to think critically. Thinking is a dangerous activity, it can get you into trouble. One has to be careful how one engages in that activity. Part of that is to

be engaged in a scholarly activity. But I also agree that we ought to be helping you to be of service to the King. I think that serving God, helping you in your duties for the Lord is important as well.

Panelist: The purposes of education—the goals of education that we are explicit about—helping students to think critically does require some measure of academic freedom to be able to explore those. It is important that students be introduced to ideas that are different from their own, held by other people, views that maybe they don't face on this campus, but will face after they leave the campus. It is also important for the faculty to present those perspectives fairly. We need to be careful as we are presenting controversial views that we don't set up straw men that are easily knocked down. That means that we are not indoctrinating. Students need to be challenged to think through why is it that we have beliefs that we do.

Question: **My question is ultimately about pushing the limits, especially issues that aren't expressly dealt with in the Statement of Faith, but might have consequences in the public arena. For example, what if a person espoused a materialist view of human nature?**

From Audience: I feel that a part of me is a commitment to scholarship. I feel I deserve to be challenged every single aspect of my thinking and for my Christian faith. It really doesn't matter what it is. It would be a bit of an injustice if I come here and I am not being challenged to impact my world in that way. If I can't address these tough questions among Christian colleagues and peers, how can I do it when I want to impact my world? If I am challenged like that then I am better off for it. This goes back to the idea of academic freedom and its value.

Panelist: This "hits the nail on the head" in terms of some of the complexity we feel here as an institution. The students and faculty have, I think, a mutual relationship of trust and commitment. From the climate that we try to create in the classroom and the way that we try to interact with each other and the way we try to push on each other back and forth in an engagement in that academic environment we are very comfortable with that kind of give and take. In fact, I think the faculty members feel that is our inherent responsibility. It is the heartbeat of the mission of what we do to help students, engage and challenge any issues so that you can be excellent critical thinkers and in the end have the impact on the world for Christ that we desire. The question raised is where it gets complicated. It might seem to people from the outside that we are speaking a foreign language as we meet three times a week in a class discussing, mulling, pulling apart, thinking over, going one way, being pulled back, and having at the end of the day that we know where we are all coming from in a way not so easy to see when one reads an article or book or hear someone speak on a one time occasion. It is very difficult to manage both the outside climate and keep cultivating this climate that we have inside the institution.

Question: **How does this relate to the College as a training ground for a certain theology?**

Panelist: Since Huntington College is owned by the United Brethren Church, it does legitimately have control over their own ministerial preparation at the College. At the same time, there are broader issues about the liberal arts and other courses outside of anything specifically related to the training of ministers where exploration comes. This raises certain problems.

Question: **I guess the most valuable thing that I have learned since coming to Huntington is that I am not just supposed to learn how to critically think, but that I am supposed to be a critical thinker. That is not like a skill that I learn, if I were to say take soccer. A valuable part of that process was when I would go up to the professor at the end of class and say you need to tell me what is the right answer. I can't deal with the ambiguity. Tell me the Bible verses and tell me how to figure this out. And they would tell me "You have to think this through on your own. You have to come to your own conclusion about this."**

Panelist: Certainly infringement of academic freedom or curtailing of academic freedom is going to have a chilling affect on faculty and the way that faculty will respond to certain kinds of questions or the way in which they will teach. I keep thinking about the question raised earlier about issues not

covered by the Statement of Faith. One should have the academic freedom to be able to explore those issues.

Question: **Our institution seems to really emphasize the integration of faith and learning. In our mission statement and philosophy statements, we talk about the pillars of academic excellence and building a firm foundation of faith. Over the last two and a half years, I have really enjoyed getting to wrestle with the issues that come with integrating faith and learning in many different departments on this campus. This has been real challenge to me, but in circumstances when those two pillars come into conflict, I wonder which one is primary? Are we an institution that seeks to develop individuals who are firmly rooted in Christ and have a firm foundation in their faith and have the knowledge and skills to impact our world? Or are we primarily seeking to develop individuals who have the knowledge and skills to impact our world and are still Christian?**

Panelist: I would hope that we could pursue the inquiry and trust that God will be faithful and come through if we are honestly pursuing truth. You might not be where you want to be, but trust in God. I think that part of this is that I am answering out of my own experience. There was a time when I was 20 years old that I didn't know what I believed even though I had told God that I believed in Him. The experience of wrestling, of not knowing, of not being sure, in some sense wrestling with God was the best thing that could ever happen to me. But it comes with dangers and the dangers are that I wouldn't come through or I wouldn't come through in the way that other people thought I should. Engaging critical thinking is a risky business. But I think that as a liberal arts college, we have to take some risks. We are not a Bible college; we are a liberal arts college.

Panelist: What I would emphasize is that we deeply believe there is a single truth. Thus, the dichotomy doesn't have to exist; we don't have to make that choice. .

Question: I was wondering how far we can say things that are consistent with our Statement of Faith, but won't be popular and might cost us in terms of support, donor support and even in enrollment. Now where is the risk/benefit balance going to be struck?

Panelist: The statement that we now have and the portion of the Philosophy of Education that we often point to which says that we not only allow for controversy within the institution we expect that there will be controversy. These date from the 1970s. It was recognized that there was some risk involved in such a program. Subsequently, many new faculty have said that was an important statement in their looking at the institution as a place that they want to invest themselves as educators. It is certainly a critical part of the fabric of who we are. These are risks that we take when we set forth principles of educational philosophy.

Moderator: I want to thank you for coming this evening. Faculty are always pleased to see critical thinking on display among the student body. I appreciate the deep thinking that you have been doing about this issue and the way you have approached our discussion tonight. I think you have evidenced some good scholarship and as a faculty member, I certainly appreciate that. I want to invite any of you who want to participate in an online discussion of academic freedom to access the campus internet site, www.campus.Huntington.edu/philosophy/page6. As has been mentioned by more than one person tonight, these are issues that we need to continue talking about for a variety of reasons; hopefully our discussions will continue. Thank you on behalf of Alpha Chi for participating in this Forum.

Please Note: This is a selective and edited summary of key questions and points raised and made at the Forum, not a transcript.

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