

## Discussion

# Reclaiming Our Centre: *Towards a Robust Defence of Academic Autonomy*

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In recent years, the autonomy of academics in many countries has been progressively undermined by a number of local, national and international developments. The purpose of this paper is to reveal how academic autonomy is being infringed. It aims also to critique the ways in which academics have been responding – both individually and collectively – to these infringements. Specifically, we argue that the ways in which academics have been defending against the erosion of their autonomy actually serves to further advance this process. We attribute this paradox to academics' impoverished conception of professional autonomy and reassert a more robust conception and practice of academic autonomy as a means of remedying the situation.

Members of the academic profession have become increasingly alarmed about growing infringements on their autonomy. Some believe that these infringements threaten the survival of the profession as “self-governing and self-determining” and undermine its distinctive values, its historically based practices and the broad social purposes that it serves (Halsey, 1992; McGregor, 1993; Reading, 1996; Vidovich & Currie, 1998). Several developments are blamed for this deteriorating situation. Among these are the displacement of collegial self-governance by managerialism in universities; the application of informa-

tion technologies to core activities of the academic profession such as teaching and learning; privatisation; globalisation; neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism; the growing political power and influence of private sector corporations over government policies; and the economic power of trans-national corporations that is embodied in regional trade agreements such as the NAFTA and GATT (Currie & Newson, 1998; Newson & Buchbinder, 1988; Polster, 1994; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Soley, 1996). Our purpose here is not to scrutinise how these developments contribute to the erosion of the autonomy of the aca-

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democratic profession, important as this may be. Rather, our purpose is to make a strategic intervention into the consideration of how to respond to infringements on academic autonomy in ways that will preserve and strengthen the notion and practice of autonomy itself.

We first assert a version of academic autonomy that is strongly rooted in the idea of serving the public interest. We believe that this notion of autonomy can generate effective strategies that create space in the current context for academics to exercise judgements in keeping with their professional commitments, as well as respond to (rather than merely defend from) the pressures, demands and realignments that are undermining their publicly oriented mission. We then focus on several specific examples to display how the erosion of academic autonomy is taking place at local, national and international levels. Rather than arising from a single cause or through a uniform process, we show that multiple, complex and often mutually reinforcing pressures underlie the erosion of academic autonomy. Next we discuss both collective and individual strategies employed by academics in response to the lessening of their autonomy. We show how these responses help to construct, at least implicitly, an impoverished and weakened conception of academic autonomy because they fail to articulate with the profession's role of serving the public interest. Finally, to illustrate though not exhaust our call for more effective responses, we propose a basis for constructing alternative strategies that exemplify the conception of academic autonomy which we advance at the beginning.

We are not proposing that academics

should or can function under conditions of absolute freedom and control over their own domain of activities. Instead, we view academic autonomy in relative terms, as a condition of practice that is shaped by the configuration of social relations, societal pressures and expectations in effect at specific historical moments. Consequently, rather than viewing academic autonomy as an abstract ideal, we focus on the social relations that support and sustain it. The growing infringements on academic autonomy suggest that these social relations are undergoing changes. We are concerned with how these changes in social relations re-position academic workers and what they imply for the meaning and exercise of academic autonomy.

### **Towards a Robust Conception of Academic Autonomy**

It could be argued that we should support our claim that academic autonomy is being eroded before we assert a more "robust" conception of academic autonomy as the basis for responding to this erosion. To give it centrality, however, we decided to advance our conception of academic autonomy before outlining the problems to which it could be a solution. For one thing, our case does not stand or fall because academic autonomy is currently under threat. Claims to academic autonomy have always been contested to some degree or another, given that they reflect particular configurations of social relations. More important, claims to autonomy by definition need to be robust or else they negate and contradict the very values and commitments on which they are based.

We believe that a robust conception of academic autonomy must be firmly rooted in a concern for the public interest. In the closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the re-mantling of the state has put into question the continuation of public sector activities of all kinds (Pannu, 1996), professional autonomy is often viewed as nothing more than a self-interested claim to work-related privileges for highly educated workers who, at public expense, exercise a monopoly over the services they provide. This critique demands more than abstract and rhetorical responses. Instead, the extent to which professional autonomy serves and preserves the public interest must be made specific, concrete and visible.

In asserting the professional claims of academics, the public needs reminding that their own interests are served by the continued exercise of academic autonomy in a myriad of ways. The public's reliance on academic commentary in news reports, un-compromised assessments in drug approval protocols, independent public policy analyses and scrutiny of political and powerful corporate actors all attest to the importance of a strong and robust exercise of academic autonomy. Moreover, academic knowledge is increasingly being directed toward developing marketable products in areas such as information processing and biological engineering technologies on the grounds that these products can bring about unprecedented improvements in health, human reproduction, quality of life, environmental challenges and the like. It is therefore vital that the public has access to adequate and un-compromised assessments of these products and promises. In other words,

the public needs to understand how infringements on autonomous academic judgement concretely endanger their own interests.

A conception of academic autonomy that strongly preserves and sustains this mission requires the following conditions of practice: the time and space necessary for reflection, evaluation and judgement based on professional criteria and considerations; a position of disinterest or open-mindedness in which the inquirer is neither guided by preconceptions of the results of their inquiry nor beholden to individuals or groups whose particular interests may be served by research results; and active responsiveness to the public interest.

Unlike other professions that offer services to the public, the academic profession does not have a codified agreement with the state to mediate its relationships with government, industry, local communities, social movements, various types of associations and the public in general. Rather, the university mediates these relationships to a considerable degree. Consequently, certain kinds of institutional arrangements need to exist inside the university, as well as between the university and its various external constituencies, to practically accomplish the conception of autonomy we have proposed. These include: collegial self-governance within universities to allow academics to develop and apply to their activities criteria of evaluation that are commensurate with their academic/disciplinary/professional judgement; unconditional, i.e. un-tied, funding (probably therefore "public" funding); active and politically effective professional associations (including learned societies) to enable academics

to continually develop, sustain and preserve their traditions, craft, skills and intellectual vitality; to expose themselves to diverse points of view and to nurture new ones; and mechanisms that facilitate two-way interchange with, and accountability to, a broad range of publics.

On the surface, our conception of academic autonomy and the conditions required for its practice do not depart from understandings of autonomy that are commonly advanced by academics themselves. We do not claim to be advocating a conception that departs significantly from these taken for granted understandings per se. Rather, the distinction lies in our emphasis on practices rather than on states of mind, on concrete social arrangements required to support such practices and on mechanisms that effectively institute two-way interchange between academics and a diverse public. More importantly, although academics' sense of their autonomy may resonate with the conception we have proposed, this sense is being less realised in practice because the actions and social relations that make it possible are being significantly changed. We will show in the next section how academic autonomy is being narrowed by these changes.

### **Infringements on Academic Autonomy**

Descriptions of infringements on academic autonomy and their implications are available in our own work and in articles and books by other scholars from a number of countries (Currie, 1996; 1998; George & McAllister, 1995; Jones, 1996; McGregor, 1993; Newson, 1992;

1994; Newson & Polster, 1998; Polster, 1994; 1996; 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 1993; Tapper & Salter, 1995). Our concern here is more with the process of erosion and we use a range of examples, drawn primarily from the Canadian experience, to illustrate several important features of it. First, we show that the erosion of academic autonomy results from multiple causes with multiple effects, which interact with and often reinforce each other. Second, infringements often take place at more than one level (local/institutional, national and international) sequentially, inter-relatedly or at the same time (Polster & Newson, 1998). Third, the academic practices being undermined or replaced with new ones are essential practices for exercising the robust conception of academic autonomy that we asserted above. Finally, the erosion of academic autonomy is not taking place simply because of a consciously coordinated power play on the part of university administrators, government bureaucrats, politicians and industry leaders, even though these agents exercise increasing influence over the practices of academic workers. Rather, the examples reveal that the process of erosion is incremental, consequential and contingent. It includes micro-practices adopted by individual academics as they "manage" their careers and intellectual commitments, as well as the collective practices of academic units and whole institutions as they shape and re-shape priorities in their research and teaching programmes. Slowly but steadily changes accumulate and begin to constitute substantial and significant transformations.

### **The Erosion of Academic Autonomy at the Institutional Level**

Inside the university various practices are being put into place which undermine collegial relations and prevent academics from charting the course of their own work. Our examples focus on ways in which institutional managerialism increasingly substitutes for collegially based methods of decision-making.

#### *Modes of Decision-making*

Documentary modes of decision-making are displacing collegial forms of decision-making in universities (Newson, 1992; Cassin & Morgan, 1992). For example, rather than developing university plans and mission statements through traditional channels such as the senate committee structure, proposals are circulated and responses are solicited from the campus community. On the surface, these new forms of decision making appear to accommodate essential features of academic autonomy: for example, they allow – indeed invite – not only responses based on academic judgement, but also responses from interested public constituencies. However, the proposals that are circulated typically originate with the university administration, often in response to initiatives advanced by external bodies like government ministries and funding agencies. Their broad objectives are presented as givens, with little if any opening for academics or public interest groups to shape them or make ultimate decisions about whether such objectives should be pursued at all. Instead, the most that is granted either to academics or public constituencies is “input” into decision-making. Control

over the parameters of the debate, the attention given to particular inputs, and the final resolution all rest in the hands of a small, less accessible group of decision makers comprised mostly if not wholly of institutional managers. Moreover, the relatively opaque process precludes open debate and by-passes the more participatory political process that used to be exercised in collegial bodies.

While normal collegial practices are being displaced by new forms of decision making, collegial bodies such as senates, faculty councils and academic departments are also being by-passed altogether in order to accommodate new “exigencies” of the times, such as reaching out to corporate sponsors for the funding that governments either no longer provide or provide through matched grant programmes requiring private sector funding partners. These new forms of university-industry partnerships and contracts are managed by central administration offices and often are negotiated in secret, ostensibly to enable administrators to protect proprietary information<sup>1</sup> and/or to seize opportunities that they would miss if they used “cumbersome” collegial processes. Classifying certain issues (such as deals that provide companies with exclusive pouring rights on campus) as “strictly administrative”, so that collegial involvement is deemed unnecessary, is another way of by-passing collegial structures<sup>2</sup>.

New public funding sources like the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) and provincial counterparts like the Ontario Challenge Fund, which promote product-relevant research partnerships have contributed in additional ways to the erosion of collegial processes in local institutions. Without specifying pro-

cedures for allocating and distributing the monies, substantial public funds have been placed in the care of these newly appointed bodies rather than established public granting agencies which have a long tradition of supporting collegial mechanisms in local institutions. Pressed by the desire to compete effectively with other institutions, many administrations have invented their own approaches and procedures for selecting areas of emphasis and engaging their researchers in applying for these funds. For example, at some Canadian universities, decisions about the areas to be targeted for CFI support were made by hand picked committees without widespread consultation of the collegium.

#### *Performance Indicators*

The adoption of performance indicators (PIs) by institutions is a second significant way that academic autonomy is being eroded. These indicators introduce new considerations into academics' decisions about what work they will do and how they will do it. In order to acquire the necessary resources and legitimacy for doing their work, academics direct their activities to the performance requirements embedded in these indicators. Individuals and academic units are thereby encouraged, if not forced, to adopt an increasingly calculating, instrumental and individualised orientation to their work (Taylor, 1999). Rather than embarking on a five-year research project like a book, thus leaving an empty space on their annual evaluation form for four years, an academic may instead decide to write one article for each of five years. Alternatively, academics may be less inclined to

engage in activities that are not readily accountable through performance measures or are not assigned scores that are high enough to make the effort worthwhile. Newer faculty are particularly susceptible to this micro-management of their work activities because they are getting careers underway and cannot easily afford to give up the benefits associated with institutionally rewarded performances, particularly if they have yet to face assessments of their work for a tenure file.

The realignment of the approaches that academics take to their work in response to PIs may jeopardize both their own and the university's ability to serve the public interest. Performance-based measures can undermine the development of a productive and supportive institutional culture and thus prevent the institution from responding effectively to some of the public interest demands that are being made on it. When the acceptable "rate" of performance over a given time period is used as a feedback mechanism, productivity can be impeded as much as enhanced. In order to withstand or to negotiate some degree of control over work pressures, academics individually and collectively are motivated to adopt strategies for controlling their performance rates so that they will not set themselves up to perform at an equal or even greater rate at a future point in time. These strategic responses to performance indicators also intensify fractiousness and competition among colleagues and academic units precisely at a time when more collaborative, cooperative and interdisciplinary ways of working, which are believed to be more suitable to producing socially beneficial knowledge, are being called for.

Finally, performance indicators also debilitate academics' morale, which along with the divisiveness and competitiveness mentioned above, undermines their ability to work together to resist infringements on their autonomy and to convince the public that such infringements pose a threat to the public interest. Measuring their performance and linking their motivation to concrete rewards suggest both to academics and to the public that, unless they are continually called to account for what they do, academics cannot be trusted to do worthwhile work, nor to judge what is worthwhile and of high priority to do, nor even to work at all without the promise of particular rewards. In a subtle way, the use of these indicators invites the public to doubt the basis for granting academic autonomy at the very time that academics need the support of the public to help challenge the actions of governments and other bodies that are preventing them from pursuing their public mission.

### **The Erosion of Academic Autonomy at the National Level**

Many of the changes that have led to infringements on academic autonomy can be traced to the under-funding of universities and academic research by governments at both national and provincial levels. (In Canada, for example, the share of total federal spending on transfers to post-secondary education has fallen by 50% since 1979/80 (Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology, 1999)). Under-funding in itself, however, does not necessitate that limitations be imposed on academic autonomy. Instead, it is a condition that

permits, or is coincident with, related developments that in turn bear on the exercise of academic autonomy. Here we use examples to illustrate two such developments at the national level: new ways of intervening "from the outside"<sup>3</sup> into the internal affairs of local universities and the reduced effectiveness of national bodies that have historically helped to preserve and sustain academic autonomy.

### *Targeted and Partnership Funding*

While both direct and indirect government support for researcher-initiated research is diminishing, support for targeted research is expanding (Polster, 1994; Kurland, 1997). As a consequence, academic researchers are less able to do the kind of research that they want to do and are compelled to orient their research to issues for which funding has been targeted. The increased emphasis on partnership research in both federally and provincially funded programmes has similar implications for the exercise of academic autonomy. Not only are external groups (mostly governments and corporations) shaping the general areas in which research will be supported, but they are also defining the parameters of entire research projects, imposing upon academics what research will be done as well as deciding the conditions under which it will be done. It is increasingly common for industrial partners to oblige academics to work in secret, to delay publication while intellectual property rights are secured and even to obtain permission from the funder to publish the research at all (Zinberg, 1991).

In addition, partnership research limits the practice and scope of academic

autonomy in a number of other ways. Partners and the academics working with them often acquire new kinds of leverage within university structures (such as on hiring and curriculum committees), giving them greater institutional power than they might otherwise have in collegially governed bodies (Newson, 1993). Evidence of this kind of “purchased leverage” is hard to come by because signed contracts between universities and corporate clients are routinely classified as “proprietary” and thus confidential, a practice which in itself points to the erosion of institutional democracy, since arrangements like these would have once been publicly debated in collegially governed academic bodies.

Also, while it is argued that partnership funding encourages universities to initiate research that is relevant and responsive to societal issues, it in fact encourages universities to focus more narrowly on the needs and interests of the business community and other financially well endowed potential partners. Universities create linking mechanisms such as industrial liaison offices to attract and sustain partners that almost exclusively focus on partnering relationships with industry – and not with social groups that have less access to financial resources. At the same time, academics who wish to respond to the needs and interests of other groups are inhibited from doing so because there are less institutional resources to support this kind of work.

Both targeted and partnership research erode academic autonomy in the longer term as well by limiting the kinds of training available to graduate students, especially in the natural sciences,

where they apprentice with faculty members who have sufficient research grants to support graduate assistants. The restriction of their training, in turn, restricts their “choices” of the kind of work they will do when they become academics. Perhaps more important, it also shapes their emerging professional identities as “entrepreneurial” academics with an eye to profit making rather than as public serving intellectuals (Crouch, 1990; 1991).

### *Professional Associations*

Strong professional associations are key to academic autonomy. Among other things, they are important forums within which the profession can talk to itself and thus sustain a conception of its mission and develop strategies to accomplish and protect it. Increasingly, however, the financial and political support for these organisations is being eroded. Government funding for them is diminishing. Indeed, in 1995, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada announced that it would be phasing out all core funding for individual scholarly associations as well as for national associations of the humanities and social sciences (SSHRC, 1995: 7-8). As well, because service to these organisations tends to count for relatively little in academic performance reviews, fewer academics are taking the time, or feel they can afford the time, to work on them. Both because of financial pressures and less active and involved memberships, collective resistance to the erosion of academic autonomy is not being exercised. Even if they are aware of the attendant dangers and should wish to do otherwise, these associations

are increasingly focusing on their survival in the face of decreased funding rather than on more complex issues affecting their members such as performance indicators and intellectual property regimes. This shift contributes to declining commitment on the part of academics to these organisations and so their strength deteriorates further<sup>4</sup>.

Government is not only reducing or eliminating the funding of these organisations, but it is also reducing their role in its own policy-making processes. In fact, a startling difference in the way governments now formulate policies bearing on universities as compared with two decades ago is that groups like professional and learned associations are marginalised if not excluded from the process, while other groups, such as those that represent the corporate sector, have moved into an “inside track” (Polster, 1994: chapter 2).

### **The Erosion of Academic Autonomy at the International Level**

Many of the incursions on academic autonomy that we addressed above are happening not only within Canada, but within many other countries. Although the same processes are taking place in many countries (and the actual forms that these incursions take, such as performance indicators, are also being developed and refined through international discussions (Polster & Newson, 1998; Lingard & Rizvi, 1998)), their main impetus is through circumstances or forces that are national in scope. Increasingly, however, the ability of academics to autonomously define the course of their own work are being limited through developments that are international in

scope. Below we provide two examples of these.

#### *Intellectual Property Regimes*

The development and extension of international (and national) intellectual property regimes (IPRs) are increasingly restricting academic autonomy. As more knowledge becomes the private property of individuals and organisations, academics' access to the resources they need to do their work is reduced and their means for gaining that access further restrict their autonomy. For example, it is becoming more common for corporate owners of intellectual property (IP) to allow academics access to that IP in exchange for previews of their research findings or first rights of refusal on the intellectual property resulting from their research (Marshall, 1997). Not only are traditional academic practices (such as freely disseminating research results) and academic autonomy in general thereby curtailed, but the privatisation of knowledge, which renders academics vulnerable to the demands of IP owners in the first place, is further advanced as well.

The development and extension of IPRs also increase pressures on, and incentives for, academics to produce intellectual property of their own. These pressures and incentives may reduce academic responsiveness to social interests and needs, particularly if the latter appear to have no “intellectual property potential”. They also open up the potential for all sorts of abuses of the public trust and betrayals of the public interest (Noble, 1993). Accordingly, the basis upon which academics claim autonomy becomes less credible and that au-

tonomy is further imperilled. In the long term, the development and extension of IPRs may threaten academic autonomy even more fundamentally. The very mission of the academic profession is the free pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. No public knowledge means no academic profession and by association no liberal university, at least as we know them today.

It is worth noting that IPRs are connected to and may intensify some of the specific incursions on academic autonomy previously discussed. For example, the development of IP is weighted – some would argue disproportionately – as a significant factor in performance assessments by universities and government funded bodies. In some protocols, obtaining a patent is one of the most highly scored measures of performance (Taylor, 1999). University efforts to promote the development of IP also help to undermine collegial decision making, insofar as the contractual and legal arrangements for licensing and patent agreements are undertaken by a special arm of the central administration, often under the cloak of confidentiality. Moreover, large sums of money from overstretched university operating funds are being allocated to technology transfer offices and legal fees that necessarily accompany IP development, monies that might otherwise be used to embark on activities that respond to a more broadly defined sense of the public interest than the advancement of private businesses.

### *Information Technology*

The implications of information technology (IT) for the university and the aca-

demie profession are multiple and far reaching (Newson, 1995). A few points regarding its implications specifically for academic autonomy are worth noting. First, even though the implications for the academic profession and academic autonomy are declared to be potentially transformative, in most countries the wiring of universities has been presented by administrators as necessary if not inevitable rather than as an option to be debated and discussed. In addition to the politics of how it is being inserted into academics' work practices, the application of IT to academic work also erodes autonomy in several respects. For instance, the pressure on academics to make themselves available to students online reduces their ability to organise and control their working lives: it effectively places them permanently "on call". Perhaps of greatest concern is the rapid expansion of online education, which involves the delivery of pre-packaged, mass-produced courses. This development erodes academic autonomy by removing from individual academics control over course content and teaching methods (Noble, 1998a).

Even more troubling is the potential of online education to further fragment or to tier the academic profession, producing an underclass of academics who are not directly involved in the production of knowledge, but only in the transmission of knowledge that has been produced by others. While the more dire consequences may fall to academics belonging to this new "underclass", this fragmentation is potentially harmful to all academics, regardless of their place in this emerging hierarchy. Further fragmentation of the profession may intensify conflicts of interest between various

classes of academics, which may reduce the profession's ability to collectively and effectively resist further incursions on its autonomy.

Finally, the intense competition that is taking place among institutions to offer their own version of online or virtual university programmes escalates the effects of other threats to academic autonomy that we have discussed. On the one hand, universities are making themselves, and their resources of knowledge and skills, even more accessible to corporate sector "partners" in the software and communications industries, in order to acquire and maintain the expensive technological equipment that their tight budgets cannot afford<sup>5</sup>. These partnership agreements cede much control over the content and methodology of teaching to the corporate partners, if not directly then through the constraints imposed by the technological formats: academics are reduced to being "talking heads" or tour guides of multimedia mazes. On the other hand, universities are also engaged, either as partners of private corporations or as educational corporations of their own, in converting courses, course designs and course materials into intellectual property. Some university administrations are aggressively asserting their ownership of academic teaching materials while, in response, academics are seeking to retain control over the use of their own course materials by resorting to copyright (Noble, 1998a; 1998b). The "technology turn" is thus dramatically upping the ante in the struggle to define ownership of intellectual property, which in turn transforms academics' exercise of their autonomy.

### **Responses to the Erosion of Academic Autonomy**

Important as it is to understand the multiple ways in which academic autonomy is being infringed, it is equally important to consider the effects of the strategies that academics are employing to respond to these infringements. We mean neither to question the motives of the academics who employ these strategies nor to be disrespectful of them. On the contrary, we are concerned that in spite of their good intentions, the academic profession is being pulled off its centre by engaging in these strategies and is intensifying the threat to its autonomy.

As already illustrated, individual responses to specific infringements often become steps in an accumulating series of actions and counter actions that further restrict their choices and limit the exercise of their professional judgement. More significantly, the overall effect of many responses is to construct a weakened conception of academic autonomy, which is less if at all responsive to the public interest. To demonstrate our points, we examine several examples of actions being taken, first, by organisations and collective bodies that represent the interests and perspectives of academics and second, by academics individually.

#### *Institutional/Associational Type Responses*

##### Guidelines and Model Clauses

One strategy pursued by organisations that represent the professional interests

of academics has been to develop guidelines and model clauses for responding to such things as corporate-university partnerships, performance-based assessments and online and technologically enhanced instruction. This strategy specifies the "conditions of practice" that should prevail as these new relationships and methodologies are put into place in local institutions. They help academics and their faculty associations to determine on a case by case basis whether a particular development infringes or does not infringe on academic autonomy and they specify the arrangements that would have to be negotiated to ensure that infringements do not take place.

Although the stated intention is to protect academic freedom and university autonomy, this approach often sidesteps important elements of a robust conception of academic autonomy. First, it tends to narrow the scope of academic freedom and autonomy to individual cases and individual academics, rather than affirming that academic freedom requires conditions of practice that apply to the overall context in which academic work is carried out. For example, guidelines on university-corporate collaborations that focus on particular instances and on the relationship between the corporate client and the particular academics who are directly involved in the partnership fail to address implications of the specific partnership, or of corporate-university partnerships in general, for entire academic units, institutions and the academic profession as a whole.

Yet the implications of partnership contracts are not limited to the individual academics involved. Rather, they have complex and far-reaching conse-

quences for other colleagues and the institution as a whole. They set precedents with which other academics will be expected to comply. In a collective bargaining context, they may also become the "past practice" that sets the standard for assessing the rights and obligations of all bargaining unit members. Funds that are allocated to manage these partnerships are not then available for others activities and collegial practices may be compromised, as in the case of funded chairs where the corporate funder acquires a role in hiring. Moreover, because these contracts are often confidential to those directly involved, the broader implications may not be known to those whom they effect. As such, the latter have no way of addressing issues that may limit their academic freedom and autonomy.

Most important, the guidelines/model clause strategy encourages an individual rather than collective conception of academic freedom and autonomy almost by definition. After all, the conditions of practice that they specify apply to a process in which the arrangements between the academic researcher and their corporate clients are customised through a specific contract. These contracts "contract out" from arrangements that collective bodies have developed and believe to be necessary for the exercise of academic autonomy, as well as from collective agreements negotiated on behalf of the faculty as a whole.

In fact, guidelines and model clauses may actually facilitate and even legitimise developments such as university-corporate partnerships, performance-based assessments and online teaching that have far-reaching implications for the academic profession. Insofar as their

check lists of conditions can serve equally well as a “how to” as a “not to” prescription, they as much permit such developments to proceed as they prevent excesses and protect “bottom-line” concerns. Rather than addressing whether or not these developments should be supported under any conditions, they instead concede that they may proceed as long as the professional interests of the academics involved are preserved. They thereby fail to give practical force to the notion of the public interest that may be at stake in these developments and thus reinforce the perception that the academic profession is concerned only with protecting the particular rights and privileges of its own members.

Although the guidelines and model clause strategy is arguably a stop-gap measure in the short run, it surrenders to a conception of academic autonomy that is impoverished in several ways. It undermines collective processes of defining and protecting academic autonomy. It is permissive toward the larger processes that are threatening academic autonomy. It also accepts secrecy in negotiating arrangements that affect the professional, as well as public, interests that academic autonomy serves.

#### Maintaining Institutional Balance

Some university administrations and collegial bodies are promoting the principle of “institutional balance” as a means of addressing some of the threats to autonomy that we described in the previous section. It is based on the assumption that academic autonomy can be effectively preserved if such things as

corporate funding and online instruction are kept within limits, and the other more traditional means of supporting and delivering university activities are retained to at least an equal degree.

On the surface, institutional balance appears to provide universities and academics with a reasonable and prudent approach to protecting academic autonomy because it allows them to be responsive within limits to government and private sector initiatives. Important elements of academic autonomy, however, are in danger of being undermined or sacrificed by adopting this strategy. Maintaining an appropriate “balance” between activities that serve the purposes of private sector donors and those that serve more traditional purposes typically involves a calculation of the aggregate number of corporate funded projects or alternatively, of the total corporate funds that support activities in a specific department, faculty or institution. What is not assessed are the specific implications of each project individually to autonomy. Funding relationships that bring in small corporate donations can have consequences for academic autonomy that are as great as, or greater than, those of much larger donations. (The fact that the “loan” of state of the art performance equipment to McGill University, in Montreal, was secured in exchange for a position for the donor on the Fine Arts Faculty’s curriculum committee illustrates the point (Newson, 1998)). Moreover, “institutional balance” does not take into account that marginal financing can secure considerable “leverage” over university affairs, as Gareth Williams has noted. In arguing that lower levels of government funding will not eliminate

the government's ability to influence the direction of university activities, Williams emphasized that "relatively small amounts of expenditure can exert powerful leverage if they are strategically used and sharply focused" (Williams, 1992: 23). Although he failed to acknowledge that the same argument about leverage applies equally well to private sector funding of universities, his point clearly challenges the assumption that maintaining "balance" in funding arrangements protects universities and academics from infringements on their autonomy. Similarly, "institutional balance" is by no means a feasible response to the threats to autonomy posed by the increasing application of technological enhancements in university teaching. To offer even a few online courses, expensive and extensive technological adaptations are necessary, thus disproportionately drawing limited funds away from more traditional forms of instruction. Moreover, once having made the investments, cash-strapped universities will attempt to recover and justify these costs by encouraging even more online courses.

Finally, the assumption is problematic in itself that balance *per se* ensures that academic autonomy will not be unduly compromised. If even a handful of academics serve as "hired hands" for corporate sponsors or as entrepreneurial professors appropriating public funds to advance their own financial interests, the credibility and effectiveness of the more publicly oriented activities carried out by other academics are undermined. In fact, the very policies that have encouraged academics and universities to pursue mutually lucrative university-corporate partnerships have, at

the same time, served to justify the increased monitoring and auditing of academics' activities by administrative and external bodies. In the U.S.A., the activities of a minority of university administrations and researchers ultimately led to congressional hearings and the imposition of "conflict of interest" guidelines to ensure that the public trust would not be violated. The potential for some academics and some institutions to adopt overly self-interested and profit-oriented motivations and practices has encouraged the view that the academic profession as a whole is either unable or unwilling to protect the public interest and has resulted in further infringements on the autonomy and judgement of all academics and all institutions.

Thus, like the guidelines/model clause strategy, the principle of institutional balance contributes to a diminished version of academic autonomy: quantitative and technical judgements substitute for academic and professional judgements; the protection and preservation of the public interest is no longer seen to be secured through unconditional funding; and the concession is made that academics are unable to govern themselves and to be publicly accountable.

#### Sanctuaries

A third organisational response to the multiple infringements on academic autonomy is creating spaces – either programmes, subsets of programmes, colleges, faculties, or entire institutions – that allow some academic work to proceed under the social relations and conditions that prevailed before the changes we have been describing took place. In fact, proponents of sanctuary pro-

grammes often boast that faculty members are guaranteed “academic autonomy” unaffected by the infringements. For instance, internal decisions about course offerings, academic objectives and pedagogies are apparently based on un-compromised collegial processes.

This response too fails in a number of ways to address the underlying pressures that contribute to the narrowing and erosion of academic autonomy. Perhaps more than the other responses, it also helps to legitimate them. First and most obvious is the elitist and exclusionary effects of this strategy: by definition, only a limited group of students and faculty members are able to participate in it. But more insidious than exclusiveness itself is the implication that both the faculty and student participants enjoy academic autonomy by “special arrangement” rather than conceiving of autonomy as the normative condition under which all academic work is accomplished.

Moreover, creating special preserves that maintain the traditional conditions and social arrangements for doing academic work in the public interest abandons the rest of higher education to the many private uses that we have described. Regardless of intentions, this give away of a publicly funded resource in itself represents a profound betrayal of the public trust on which academic autonomy is based. Perhaps most alarming is that this strategy encourages blindness toward what is happening in the rest of the institution or system of higher education, as well as toward the limitations to which even sanctuaries are subject. Although the preserved space may be empowered to determine its internal practices, it does not have the ability to

prescribe the parameters under which it continues to function. The sanctuary approach thus helps to institutionalise an ineffective and impoverished conception of academic autonomy, even the more because proponents often represent themselves as taking a strong and uncompromising stand toward the developments that pose threats to academic autonomy.

### *Individual Responses*

As well as through collective organisations, academics are individually changing their practices and adopting a range of personal strategies in response to infringements on their autonomy. To illustrate, we briefly elaborate on three types of individual responses to separate but related infringements, each of which mutually reinforces the others.

#### Retreating From Collegialism

Because of the decreasing institutional influence of collegial mechanisms (Newson, 1992; Currie & Vidovich, 1998; Taylor, 1999) the investment of time and energy in collegial bodies and activities is being viewed by many academics as yielding diminishing returns. Rather than revitalizing these mechanisms, they are instead retreating into a more limited conception of their work, such as concentrating on research, teaching and other projects (often entrepreneurial) over which they feel they have more control. These choices, however, further diminish their autonomy because the space in which they carry out their more narrowly defined activities is very much shaped by decisions taken in the “bureaucratic sphere” that they abandon.

Hence, their ability to do the kinds of teaching and research work that they want continually diminishes in proportion to their abdication of collegial mechanisms which are the means available to them to shape the broader context of their work. Moreover, as academics try to acquire additional resources for their work by putting their energy into projects that administrations or corporate sponsors wish to promote (such as the development of on-line courses in exchange for a “reduced teaching load”), less of their energy and less resources are available for the collective projects of collegial units.

#### Adjusting to Declining Resources

As argued previously, declining levels and re-allocations of government funding as well as intellectual property rights that increase private ownership of knowledge are reducing access to the knowledge that academics need to conduct their research. Rather than collectively resisting these trends, many academics are accommodating to them. For example, they are tailoring their research interests to the needs of external sponsors, or making deals with the owners of knowledge (such as signing over their own rights to the knowledge resulting from their research) in order to gain free access to the knowledge they need. While these strategies may enable selected academics to do research in the short term, they do nothing to halt the overall reduced access to resources that would allow them to autonomously define and conduct their work. Instead, such strategies promote further the changes in the social relations through which funding and knowledge resources are being dis-

tributed, and they advance the privatisation of knowledge which impedes the free pursuit and dissemination of knowledge.

#### Proving One's Value

Growing demands on academics to demonstrate that they are producing value for money is a third manifestation of their declining autonomy. Rather than resisting and critiquing the narrow, utilitarian conception of academic work inherent in these demands, many individual academics are accepting, even promoting the use of performance indicators as a legitimate means of “proving” their worth and showing that they deserve financial support. However, compliance with performance indicators acquiesces to and reinforces a weakened conception of academic autonomy. Performance indicators introduce external and limited criteria into the evaluation of academic work (Polster & Newson, 1998). They may also reduce the quality of the work that academics produce by encouraging them to undertake projects and approaches because they are more likely to produce tangible outcomes or deliverables, rather than because they are intrinsically important or valuable (Taylor, 1999). As well, academics may become less responsive to social groups and social needs which are more difficult to deliver or are less recognised as having value. As academics increasingly orient what they actually do to what they can show that they are doing, they undermine justifications for their autonomy that are based on the quality of their work and their responsiveness to the public. Thus, once again, rather than protecting their autonomy, their re-

sponses as individuals open it up to greater challenge and further erosion.

### Conclusion

Many of the current responses to the multiple infringements on academic autonomy are problematic for a number of reasons. They tend to shift the focus of academic autonomy from the collective to the individual. They concede that judgements and evaluations of academic quality and content can be based on other than intellectual, professional or publicly oriented criteria. They also promote a model of academic autonomy, which tends to represent academic freedom and university autonomy as professional entitlements failing to make visible how academic autonomy serves the public interest. Even though they may have some short-term utility, these responses constitute a weak and politically ineffective response to the pressures that actually underlie infringements on academic autonomy. At the same time they reflect, reinforce and may even generate pressures that lead to the further lessening of autonomy and public trust.

But perhaps most significant is that these responses proceed from a fundamentally defensive position. Rather than being rooted in a robust conception of academic autonomy, the responses we have described are reactive, fragmented and aimed at the symptoms of the erosion of academic autonomy rather than the underlying processes through which it is being accomplished. An analogy to chess may clarify why this is problematic. As chess players know, if they play simply in response to their opponents' moves, they are ultimately destined to lose the game. In contrast, when their

play is centred in a clear vision of what they want to accomplish, they have a basis from which to respond effectively to their opponent's moves in an integrated way and to work creatively toward the achievement of their own goals.

How might we then begin to develop offensive responses to replace the more defensive ones that we have examined? We do not intend to answer this question with a programme for action that lists specific rules or recipes to follow in specific cases or formulae that help to determine the appropriate response to particular kinds of infringements. We have several reasons for not answering in this way.

First, rules and formulae cannot be created to cover all the particulars of specific situations. Second, defined responses to particular kinds of situations tend to require specific and legalistic definitions of academic rights and responsibilities and of the specific conditions to which they apply, thus inadvertently limiting the scope of academic autonomy. Third, whether by administrations and governments who wish to promote developments that lead to infringements on autonomy, or whether by professional associations and individual academics who are trying to limit and contain these infringements, the increasing proliferation of rules that segmentalise, regulate and micro-manage academic workers' activities only contributes to deepening the crisis around academic autonomy. In other words, we believe that attempts to protect academic autonomy through regulation will only further erode it. Far more desirable and effective would be for individuals and groups to be able to "customise" their own responses to the

particular cases in which they are involved, based on a collective sense of academic autonomy that they share with professional colleagues as well as the public that they serve. To have such a sense requires not rules, codes and guidelines, but rather a living academic culture that consistently supports and advocates commitments, values and practices that are commensurate with the profession's purposes and mission. This is not to say that universities and academics should never produce rules, codes and guidelines to inform their actions. It is rather to say that such objectified forms of consciousness (Smith, 1987) cannot substitute for, nor sustain by themselves, the vibrant academic culture which we have in mind. Indeed, such rules, codes and guidelines may only serve academic and the public's interests if they develop from within, and are continually transformed by, a vibrant academic culture. To have such a culture means that the culture that academics currently share must be revitalised to face the many pressures that currently threaten its survival. Such revitalization must also involve a refinement of the academic mission in relation to the pressing issues of our times. We have not been able to address the issue of the academic mission in any detail here, although our conception of academic autonomy clearly implies a particular conception of that mission as well. One urgent focus is to collectively revitalise the conception of academic autonomy and to move from a more robust conception to resist the multiple incursions that are being made upon it. This is the first and most important strategic move that the academic profession must make. Once we are clearly and firmly rooted within

such a conception, the specific steps that we need to take to defend our autonomy in our particular institutions will become clear.

The trick is to agree on and to remain grounded in a conception of academic autonomy that guides our collective and individual responses to its erosion. Towards that end, we offer two suggestions. First, as academics, we should not let ourselves off the hook and push this issue aside in order to deal with the many other demands we have upon us, which stem in large part from our continually putting this issue aside. Instead, we must spend time thinking and talking with colleagues as well as interested and concerned members of the public, wherever we find them, about what a more robust conception and practice of academic autonomy would involve. Second, academics need to engage in more collective thinking and action on this issue, perhaps through initiating discussions on academic autonomy in various professional associations which, in turn, could begin to generate among academics and their associations, in as many national and local contexts as possible, a shared conception of the principles and conditions that are basic to the practice of a sufficient and necessary degree of autonomy. This would be valuable given that the problems we have addressed in this paper are rapidly becoming endemic to academic experiences across the globe. Academics must not underestimate the importance, indeed urgency, of this mobilization. Unless we take the time to seriously address these issues, the university as an institution may continue to survive, but academic autonomy and the academic profession itself may not.

## Notes

- 1 The attempt in the early 1990s to locate the International Space University at York University was an illustration of this (see Newson, 1998). More recently, controversy and political dissent have also emerged at long-established institutions like the University of Toronto and at McGill University because of un-collegial and secretive decisions taken by university administrators to accept funds from corporate donors.
- 2 It is worth noting that such deals erode university autonomy in a number of respects. Two examples illustrate the point. Recently, at a conference at McMaster University in Canada, a student who hosted a programme on the campus radio station reported that he was engaged in an on-air critical discussion of the practices of a particular fast food corporation that had a license to operate food outlets on campus. The discussion was interrupted by his producer who informed him that he needed to be mindful of that particular corporation's commercial relationship with the university, which might preclude him from being critical. As it turned out, no such formal prohibitions existed, but it is noteworthy that the producer thought that they should act on this presumption. Controversy has also arisen in a mid-western university in the U.S.A. concerning a commercial agreement with "Nike" that precludes public criticism of their sports products. The implications for academic autonomy are obvious if and when universities engaged in such arrangements also conduct research in relevant areas such as, in these cases, food safety and kinesthetics.
- 3 In addition to the example we provide below, the imposition of national codes of conduct on academics, such as the Tri-council Code of Ethics with which Canadian academics and universities are now forced to comply on pain of sanction is a relatively new, and potentially quite significant, form of restricting academic autonomy "from the outside".
- 4 Our comments are primarily based on the annual meetings, policy initiatives and committee reports of our own Learned Society as well as those of the newly merged Humanities and Social Sciences Federation of Canada.
- 5 One example involves the entire California State University system with four large multi-national high tech software and communications companies who have been willing to "foot the bill" for the SCU system's technological upgrade in exchange for an astounding degree of control and ownership of intellectual property. The deal has been contested as monopolistic and contrary to public interests and has even involved legislative intervention. (As reported at the "Digital Diploma Mills? A second look at information technology in higher education" Conference, Harvey Mudd College, April 23-26, 1998).

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