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John Carroll University  
Faculty Member Open Letter  
RE: Board Decision to Eliminate Tenure  
3/2/2021

**A Faculty Member's Reflection on the Board of Director's Decision to Effectively Eliminate Tenure at John Carroll University**

I am the father of a lively five-year-old son and the husband to a wonderful woman. I am an alumnus of John Carroll University. As a student here, I learned about speaking the truth, as I see it, as best as I can. I not only learned *how* to do this but also *why I had a responsibility to do it*.

I am currently an Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department at JCU. What follows is an excerpt from my teaching statement submitted with my application for tenure to JCU in September, 2020. In the excerpt I describe how I have been challenging what has come to be known as *cancel culture* in the classroom. I have been doing this without tenure despite intense social pressures. I have had many restless and sleepless nights considering the possibility that I would be *cancelled* for this academic pursuit. Nevertheless, I have challenged this cancel culture because—as I learned as a student at John Carroll—I have a responsibility to promote vigorous and honest pursuit of the truth.

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Teaching Statement Excerpt

I believe quite strongly that with power comes responsibility. And a campus controversy at JCU in Spring, 2019 indicated to me that I had a responsibility to teach students and model for them how to engage in civil disagreement.

The aforementioned controversy was the publication of a student editorial in the Carroll News criticizing the annual LGBTQ drag show. Tensions were high among faculty and students. To my disappointment, personal attacks and inflammatory remarks were evident on all sides of this issue (and, most troublingly to me, among some of the faculty). These problems, of course, are not unique to John Carroll. Nationally, political polarization is at an all-time high, cancel and PC culture are making it harder than ever to have constructive disagreement, and some of our political leaders commonly engage in inflammatory rhetoric that sets a very poor example for all of us.

I spent much of the summer of 2019 reflecting on how to use my role as faculty member to promote freedom of expression and promote civil disagreement, two factors that I believe are integral to higher-education and the advancement of society. After much reflection and research into the issue, I discerned that some well-intentioned higher-educational initiatives such as “safe spaces,” “microaggressions,” and “trigger warnings” were paradoxically increasing tensions on campuses. They send the message to students that they are not capable of dealing with ideas that make them uncomfortable and that it is not appropriate to discuss topics that *might* offend someone. (c.f. *The Coddling of the American Mind*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>). The result is an increase in self-censorship that precludes students from engaging in effective dialectics to seek the truth. Students and faculty alike are walking on eggshells. We are all robbed of the opportunity to have honest conversations with those whom disagree with us, which is the gold standard intervention for decreasing polarization.

After much thought, in my introductory lectures of the next semester, when describing my teaching philosophy and my expectation of freedom of expression, I told students that the classroom was not a safe space and they would not be receiving any trigger warnings. I explained to them that confronting ideas that make one uncomfortable is necessary for growth and for seeking the truth. I told them that I was confident in their ability to confront these ideas both emotionally as well as interpersonally. Finally, I made it abundantly clear that regardless of our disagreements that there was the expectation that everyone will treat each other with respect—that regardless of our disagreements we are all human beings, in the same classroom, and at the same university with the mission of improving society.

This was, of course, an uncomfortable thing for me to say, because I was not sure how the students would react. In the next part of this first-day lecture, I asked students to reflect on their own comfort discussing their viewpoints in the classroom and then discuss in pairs. When they began discussing, the positive energy, engagement, and enthusiasm was obvious (much to my relief). I had set the example that it was appropriate to speak freely despite the overarching social pressures.

Three weeks into the Fall, 2020 semester I had a major opportunity to challenge students to engage in civil disagreement. A social activist had given a presentation the night before about systemic racism and its influence on Oscar nominations (the major nominations tend to have 17 to 20 nominations out of 20 go to white actors/actresses). She had coined the social media hashtag #OscarsSoWhite to promote her activism. After much thought, I saw this as an opportunity to model how to analyze and express divergent viewpoints in a civil manner. In my psychological research methods class, I posed the following question: What alternative explanations (other than systemic racism) are there for the lack of representation for non-white actors/actresses at the Oscars? (We had recently learned about the need to eliminate alternative explanations in order to infer causality). Here too, this was uncomfortable for me to say because of the emotionally charged nature of the issue. I was also experiencing stereotype threat (fear of being associated with a negative stereotype).

After students reflected on their own, I described the principles of the Ignatian conversation as a framework for our discussion. I assigned them to discuss in pairs. The discussion started hesitantly but after a few moments I was quite relieved by their positive energy and enthusiasm. In subsequent group discussions, the students identified several factors for underrepresentation of non-white actors in Oscar nominations (in addition to systemic racism), including statistical explanations (based on US census data it would be expected that 15 out of 20 nominees would be white), lack of opportunities for non-white actors, and possible lack of interest in acting among non-white people. In short, our dialectic yielded a more nuanced and comprehensive view of the problem, which as I explained to the students is the best way to help the people who are affected by the problem.

I next challenged students with one more question: How might the #OscarsSoWhite promotion of the social issue have the unintended consequence of harming race relations and social progress for individuals from minority backgrounds in the long run? Here too, I was proud (and relieved) by the positive and comprehensive discussion of the issue. The end of the large group discussion was a civil back-and-forth dialectic between two students from different backgrounds and viewpoints. One student was a person who spontaneously disclosed to the class on the first day that she feels that conservative viewpoints are met with great resistance in some of her classes. She argued that the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag naturally puts people on the defensive and thus they tune out the message. The other, African-American student argued that the issue would not get nearly as much attention if the promotion was not in some way controversial. She said that based on her own anecdotal experience people tend to

want to see people similar to them succeed, which explained the nomination discrepancies. I was quite proud of her when she then suggested that the answer to the disagreement was to conduct a research study! (In fact, she conducted a study along these lines for the class requirements). Overall, the dialectic yielded a nuanced and comprehensive set of views, the likes of which will decrease polarization and promote the search for truth.

After the class period, 4 out of 16 students spontaneously and privately reached out to me. One student was somewhat tearful as she told me how much she appreciated the way that I lead the discussion (which led me to tear up, as well). Another student quipped, "That went surprisingly well!" A third student lamented that she felt like she had limited opportunities to have these sorts of conversations. Finally, a fourth student emailed me, saying, "I wanted to let you know how much I loved the conversation we had today...I think it is great that you bring these topics up and encourage everyone to engage!...So thank you so much and keep challenging us."

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The outcome of my tenure application, from which this excerpt was taken, was that I was awarded tenure in December, 2020. I felt many positive emotions at the time. But three feelings stood out above all others—*protected, empowered, relieved*.

My academic speech and writing were *protected*. I would not be cancelled for speaking the truth, as I see it, as best as I can. I was *empowered* to disseminate my views of the truth widely, outside of the classroom, throughout the university, and into the research literature. I envisioned and aspired for an almost inconceivable positive impact on my students, the university, and society. Finally, my family is the most important aspect of my life, and before being awarded tenure I felt significant apprehension about being cancelled and putting their well-being at risk with my speech. So, most of all, I was *relieved* of the burden of balancing my responsibility to speak the truth with my duty to preserve my family's financial security.

These positive feelings were short lived, as my tenure was effectively taken from me on March 1, 2021. I am no longer certain that I will be protected to teach and conduct research in a manner consistent with my values. I now have another responsibility, this time to my family, to seriously reconsider my employment at John Carroll University—the same place where I learned the importance of speaking the truth, as I see it, as best as I can.

Respectfully,  
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Clinical Psychologist