ACADEMIC FREEDOM IS SOMETHING that only rarely becomes a news story and most of us have only a vague idea of what distinguishes it from other freedoms. But in May this year, when professor Robert Buckingham was fired from the University of Saskatchewan, it suddenly became a hot topic. His offence was to write a letter to provincial politicians, not only questioning the administration’s plan for economic restructuring, but the university president’s dictum that no one publicly criticise it.

A few days later the university backtracked and rehired Buckingham, not as dean of the School of Public Health, an administrative position he’d held since 2009, but to his job as a tenured professor. And why was that? Because part of the academic freedom that faculty members have entitles them, unlike administrators, to speak their minds freely, even outside of the university community, and to directly criticize the university itself.

The Buckingham case echoes a pivotal incident which helped formulate Canadian concepts of academic freedom: that of Harry Crowe, a professor who was fired by United College in Winnipeg in 1958 for expressing critical opinions of the university and religion, again in a letter that became public. As Jon Thompson, president of the Harry Crowe Foundation, says, in his preface to the book, it was a case that galvanized the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT).

There’s more to it than being able to speak out critically. Academic freedom also means professors can direct the path of their own research and determine how they will teach their courses, without interference from corporate, political or administrative pressure. For academics, the primary value of academic freedom is the ability to pursue inquiries without restriction or compromise, and to be able to publicize their research freely. Yet, as with all ideals, academic freedom exists in a world of competing interests, not all of which welcome challenges to conventional wisdom, arcane and difficult research, or a disregard for commercial potential.

James Turk, the recently retired executive director of CAUT, is the editor of Academic Freedom in Conflict, a collection of 15 essays that examine a variety of threats to academic freedom. The threats don’t all come from the usual suspects, including corporate-minded administrators, Conservative governments, and industry patrons. They also come from within the academy as it struggles to reconcile the ideal with changing contexts and demands; and, how freedom may need to be tempered as well as defended in its relations with other freedoms and ideals.

Turk is clear that academic freedom is not the same as the general right of freedom of expression; it is a special right that academics have and is the foundation of the true purpose of the university. Without it, meaningful academic work cannot take place; that is, the work that ensures the unfettered pursuit of knowledge and the critical thinking necessary in a free and democratic society.

Fifteen experts in the field, from both the United States and Canada, cover the surprisingly broad dimensions of this issue today. (It quickly becomes apparent that this issue is not as simple as it looks.) The essays are grouped in six sections, each devoted to academic freedom in relation to something that has the potential to limit it. The problems arising from faith-based institutions that require a particular religious practice, or restrictions on academic activity in university-industry collaborations, aren’t unexpected. Nor is the growing practice of using “institutional autonomy,” the university itself, to curtail faculty activity. In fact, the most recent policy of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) has shifted the emphasis away from academic freedom as an individual professor’s right to a right that belongs to the university as a whole. Which, of course, gives it the “freedom” to exert greater influence over what professors do.

What did surprise me was the way in which internal constraints such as disciplinary norms, or the goal of equity, can come into conflict with the ideal of academic freedom. That professional norms in a discipline may actually stifle dissenting opinions, or challenges to orthodoxy, is examined in essays by Matthew Finkin and Mark Gabbert. Clearly, academic freedom does not entail the right to say absolutely anything without evidence to back it.
delicately dissects the case of the Israeli prohibited on campus? Richard Moon sive actions. Should some speech be policies against various kinds of offen- hate speech and there are a myriad of and so don’t enjoy academic freedom. get into the academy in the first place marginalized groups means that they don’t tested Spaces,” discrimination against Freedom from Discrimination in Con-

11, “Balancing Academic Freedom and Freedom from institutional censorship.” How does this play out in a faith-based university that requires a commitment to a particular religious practice as a condition of employment? Despite at least one Canadian religious university — Saint Paul University, in Ottawa — accepting the standard guarantee of academic freedom in its collective agreement, John Baker and William Bruneau are both blunt in saying that religious requirements cannot be reconciled with the true aims of a university, or with what Baker calls the “essential desir-

ability of openness to revision” — a lovely phrase that seems to encapsulate the whole of the academic enterprise.

Perhaps an even thornier issue that has developed in the last few years is the concern with how academic freedom might hamper the growth of a more equitable and civil campus. Of course, as Anver Saloojee points out in chapter 11, “Balancing Academic Freedom and Freedom from Discrimination in Con-tested Spaces,” discrimination against marginalized groups means that they don’t get into the academy in the first place and so don’t enjoy academic freedom.

As a society we have legislated against hate speech and there are a myriad of policies against various kinds of offensive actions. Should some speech be prohibited on campus? Richard Moon delicately dissected the case of the Israeli Apartheid Week, an annual event that occurs on several university campuses. He provides an understanding of how the intersection of politics, public and private space, collegiality, freedom of speech and incendiary emotions might just possibly be balanced.

CAUT policy maintains that academic freedom means “the right, without restriction by prescribed doctrine” to, among other things, teach, discuss, publish, and express an opinion. “Academic freedom always entails freedom from institutional censorship.” How does this play out in a faith-based university that requires a commitment to a particular religious practice as a condition of employment? Despite at least one Canadian religious university — Saint Paul University, in Ottawa — accepting the standard guarantee of academic freedom in its collective agreement, John Baker and William Bruneau are both blunt in saying that religious requirements cannot be reconciled with the true aims of a university, or with what Baker calls the “essential desir-

ability of openness to revision” — a lovely phrase that seems to encapsulate the whole of the academic enterprise.

The many instances of corporate, government or industry partnerships have often led to a loss of institutional autonomy, and thus academic freedom, when the non-university partners try to influence the course of research or teaching. Though we may associate this most often with American universities, James Turk provides the disturbing results of a recent CAUT study that shows the extent to which agreements with corporations are made in secret and with a lack of formal protection for the freedom of the researchers and universities involved.

Who would find this book useful? Academics certainly. And those curious about conditions in today’s universities will find it a terrific resource for looking at the issue of academic freedom. But the essays also provide useful ways of thinking about freedom and restrictions to speech and thought in the wider world.

If universities are doing their jobs properly, their concerns become part of our whole culture. The ideal of academic freedom upholds the importance of critical thought challenging received wisdom and convention. The academy, for all its faults, is perhaps the only place in our society, outside of the arts, where this kind of freedom is not only taken for granted but also seen as essential to its purpose. To guard that is critical.

Next year will be the 100th anniver-

sary of the Association of American University Professors’ pivotal “1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure.” Econ-

omist Edward Ross was fired by Stanford University in 1900 for criticizing the industrial exploitation of immigrant workers. The establishment and defence of academic freedom has been a constant struggle ever since. Academic Freedom in Conflict is a fitting guide to a complicated subject that is certain to become more rather than less contentious in the future.

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