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## That's 'Your' Opinion

By GARY A. OLSON

**HEADS UP**Advice for  
academic  
administrators

Not long ago, a scholar of postmodern thought taught an honors seminar on the French philosopher Michel Foucault to a class of juniors. Twenty minutes into her explanation of his theory of discourse, one of the students sneered, "Well, that's *his* opinion. I don't agree."

Stunned, the professor explained that, given the fact that the class had only just begun reading the philosopher's work, the first task was neither to agree nor to disagree but to understand exactly what was being argued. Agreement or disagreement was a privilege earned only after having mastered and reflected on the material.

Annoyed, the student replied, "Everyone is entitled to an opinion, and my opinion is that he is wrong."

Clearly, that undergraduate was in no position to contribute in any meaningful way to an evaluation of Foucault's thought -- especially since the student had only been introduced to the material a week earlier. Yet in one definitive statement he had dismissed the thought of one of the world's most celebrated postmodern thinkers.

The student's peremptory dismissal -- "Well, that's his opinion" -- is not an aberration. That assertion and the attitude it embodies have become endemic, not only in society at large but in academe. Apparently, nowadays an opinion will trump a fact, a reasoned argument, an empirically verified observation -- even a treatise by an eminent scholar. An opinion is the great equalizer, and everyone has one. It silences all arguments, squelches all dialogue: That's your opinion. End of discussion.

Even faculty members and administrators are not immune from that inherently anti-intellectual attitude.

Each semester, a department head I know at a private four-year college observes classes taught by faculty members on the tenure track. The object is to help them improve their teaching and strengthen their case for tenure and promotion. In each case, the chairwoman completes an "observation checklist," recording specifics of what she observed in the classroom (for example, whether the instructor answered students' questions). Then she prepares a written evaluation based on the checklist.

In her evaluation of an inexperienced assistant professor, the chairwoman pointed to several practices that she had observed in his classroom and suggested that his teaching would improve if he discontinued them. Rather than accept -- or even ponder -- the well-intentioned advice, the young instructor disputed the evaluation altogether, contending that teaching is an art and everyone has his or her own style. In effect, he told her, "That's *your* opinion."

I also know of a college dean who was removed from office and disciplined for fiscal mismanagement. He explained to a reporter for the campus newspaper that he really hadn't done anything wrong; it was all a

matter of "interpretation" of the facts. He pledged to offer the "other side" of the story sometime in the near future. The "fact" that the college was tens of thousands of dollars in the red seemed immaterial.

We seem to be witnessing the apotheosis of opinion, a trend that has grave consequences for all of us in higher education. A generation of students and others are training themselves not to become critical thinkers, not to search for evidence or support of an assertion, and not to hold themselves or others accountable for the assertions they make.

A major challenge for higher education in the years to come will be to ensure that logic, critical thinking, close reading, the scientific method, and the spirit of inquiry in general don't become lost arts -- lost to the imperative of opinion.

This widespread trend affects academe in ways that are not always immediately apparent. For example, it seems reasonable to posit a connection between the increased level of litigation in academe and the insistence that everything can be reduced to an opinion.

College officials are reporting record numbers of lawsuits, many of which are frivolous. Tenure denials have become susceptible to lengthy legal challenges, even when there is a preponderance of evidence that the complainants clearly did not meet the institution's stated requirements. Some candidates for faculty positions have sued institutions because, in their opinion, they were more qualified than the individuals who had been appointed. Doctoral candidates have sued their major professors over whether their dissertations were ready for defense. And provosts are being sued over even the most minor personnel decisions, from the appointment of part-time instructors to the selection of teaching-award recipients.

As the climate in academe becomes one where opinions carry special weight, many people are finding it all too easy to challenge administrative decisions. If you believe your opinion is just as valid as the decision of the committee that recommended appointing someone other than you to a position, then you may well feel entitled to challenge the recommendation. To you that committee's decision is nothing more than another opinion.

Many academic administrators are attempting to counter the trend. More and more institutions are strengthening critical-thinking components of the general-education curriculum. Department heads and program directors are making a special effort to encourage classroom instructors to teach students how to distinguish between what is mere opinion and what the discipline considers to be a stronger truth claim.

But the glorification of opinion is not merely a curricular issue, since professors, staff members, and administrators fall prey to the same temptation. One way that administrators can help curb the ever-increasing influence of unsupported opinion is to ensure that all stakeholders understand exactly how administrative decisions are made.

Transparency and effective communication about how decisions are made will demonstrate that a formal process is in play, show how that process works, and explain why a particular decision was made. Increased transparency will not satisfy everyone, but people will find it that much harder to argue with decisions when decision-making processes are clearly articulated and available for all to scrutinize.

I am not suggesting that the world is black and white and that we should always expect to arrive at certainty in any given dispute, or that there will always be one individual who possesses the truth or who has some privileged access to "reality." Rather, I am suggesting that in academic settings (if not everywhere else) truth claims should be expected to be supported by something stronger than a "feeling" or intuition.

Even "informed opinions" -- judgments based on a substantive analysis of a subject -- are acceptable. What is not acceptable in academic disputes (as opposed to, say, elementary school disagreements during recess)

is the facile termination of dialogue with "That's *your* opinion."

Nor am I suggesting that people should not pursue legitimate grievances against their institutions, although when we believe that all opinions are created equal, we may be tempted to forget that university officials can make perfectly reasonable decisions that don't happen to go our way.

What I am suggesting is that while the apotheosis of opinion is a broad social problem, those of us in higher education -- especially in administrative posts -- should take the lead in demonstrating that all opinions are decidedly not equal. That's exactly why we in the academic world exist in the first place: to sift through multifarious data and perspectives and arrive at reasoned conclusions.

But then again, that's only *my* opinion.

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