

# There's too little academic freedom

FREE speech is not laissez faire.

What are the limits of academic freedom? Steven Schwartz and Gregory Schwartz (*HES*, June 27) worry about the hazards of too much academic freedom. I think that, in practice, there is too little.

They take me to task for advocating a laissez-faire approach, namely that "anyone's point of view, no matter how ignorant or destructive" should "be treated as equal to any other view". Their attack misses the mark, though, since laissez faire, as they describe it, is not my view at all.

I argued that "in a free society the response to false and damaging speech should be more speech, not an attempt to shut up the speaker" (*HES*, April 18). Contrary to Schwartz and Schwartz, this doesn't mean that all views are treated as having equal value.

When someone says something that is considered false or damaging, it is vital to respond with contrary evidence and effective arguments ("more speech").

The case that I addressed, the summary dismissal of Associate Professor Ted Steele from the University of Wollongong in February, involved Steele's public comment about alleged upgrading of marks. I argued that Steele's claims were being discredited through public debate and that the sacking

"gave him more credibility than he could have achieved on his own".

Schwartz and Schwartz suggest that, according to the laissez-faire view, it is all right to have a geographer who teaches that the world is flat so long as others say the world is round. Perhaps they use this amusing example because they cannot document a realistic case of a teacher who diverges dangerously from prevailing views. My guess is that the greater danger is dogmatic teaching, whether the views taught are standard or not.

They say that "universities would go too far if they employed alchemists". The reality is that most academics are sensitive to peer pressure and keep heretical beliefs to themselves. Furthermore, many academics are worried about offending university officials and funding bodies, and are consequently hesitant about undertaking research or expressing views that may hinder their careers or just make life less pleasant.

While Schwartz and Schwartz worry about the dangers of a mythical laissez-faire approach, I think the greater problem is that so many academics are justly wary of exercising even that limited academic freedom they are claimed to have.

**BRIAN MARTIN**

University of Wollongong