

INSIDE HIGHER ED

Majority-Rule Math

Matt Reed

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This happened when I was in fifth grade. I was so gobsmacked that I actually objected in class and then at home, and I still remember it (cough) years later.

We had a substitute teacher for a few days. She was hopeless when it came to teaching math. As we went over the answers to a homework assignment, she got flustered when she realized that she didn't understand the problems. So she had us vote on the correct answers. It was math by majority rule.

Even then, at all of 10 years old, I knew that wasn't how math worked. A mistake made by the majority of the class is still a mistake. I still remember Mom's reaction when I told her about it. It struck both of us as dangerous, because math builds on itself. If you get the building blocks wrong, heaven help you when you get to the next level.

The substitute didn't last very long, which was for the best. But that habit of mind shows up from time to time in various contexts.

This week, Neal McCluskey, of the Cato Institute, weighed in on the Nikole Hannah-Jones tenure denial by the University of North Carolina. His perspective brought me right back to majority-rule math. It's hard to summarize without sounding like caricature, so here it is in his own words.

“Fundamentally, academic freedom -- the grounds on which it is argued that only university faculty should make academic decisions -- is incompatible with forced funding of an institution. There is good reason that academics should be able to pursue ideas as they see fit -- progress comes when untested and sometimes unpopular ideas can be explored -- but academics must not be more free than everyone else; their freedom cannot mean others are forced to fund them.”

By “forced funding,” he's referring to taxes. The argument is that he who pays the piper calls the tune; if taxpayers don't like what's being taught, they have every right to direct their duly-elected representatives to crack down on it. The job of anyone paid by taxpayers is to say what the taxpayers want to hear. If the majority decides that two plus two is six, then six it is.

But it isn't. And teaching students that it is isn't doing them any favors.

Academic freedom isn't license to spout whatever you want. It's a hunting license for truth. It's a suspension of disbelief in the name of discovering or confronting truth. Sometimes the truth is

unpopular, or in conflict with powerful interests. Big Tobacco wasn't happy with the scientists who found the link between smoking and lung cancer. But the link was the truth, and we are better off as a society for knowing that. Certain powerful industries aren't happy about the scientific consensus that has developed over decades regarding anthropogenic climate change. But the data are the data. In Hannah-Jones's case, a powerful political group doesn't want to hear anything negative about American history. But the facts are the facts, whether you want to hear them or not.

McCluskey makes the category mistake of seeing academic freedom as a perk that certain individuals receive. That just gets it wrong. Academic freedom is based on the recognition that the truth is independent of the whims of the powerful, and that we, as a society, are better off knowing the truth. Academic freedom is freedom to do the work. And it's important not because one group of people is special -- nobody is -- but because the truth matters. The unique burden on academics -- the payback for subsidizing inquiry, if you want to look at it that way -- is that academics are professionally obligated to share what they find. In exchange for being granted the room to explore, they're obliged to report back on what's there. Because we don't know what will be found until it's found, we can't rely on the price system. Scholarship is inherently public; public funding is a perfectly rational response to what would otherwise be a market failure. Putting scholarship out in the public helps move discovery forward; paywalling all scholarship would desiccate inquiry.

Seen in that light, denying Hannah-Jones tenure because you find her politics distasteful is self-defeating. She's already a Pulitzer Prize winner and a MacArthur genius, and her work has been circulated far and wide; in terms of the truths she has found, the horses got out of the barn some time ago. Making her a cause célèbre only spreads her message even more. She has already nudged the public conversation more than most tenured scholars ever will.

Academic freedom is not an individual good. It's a public good. It's a public good because it enables the discovery of truth that can be shared with the public and built on over time. As a public good, it merits public funding.

Of course, one could also nitpick the factual claims that public universities are primarily funded by taxes -- they are not -- or that public funding itself is a direct reflection of taxes, which it is not. Stephanie Kelton's *The Deficit Myth* is excellent on that. But those are footnotes. The real issue is that the truth belongs to the public, and that the discovery and publication of truth requires time and resources.

Reducing academic freedom to a job perk held by people of the opposite party misses the point. Two plus two is not six, no matter what a party currently in power says. As a society, we need people in a position to find, and tell, the truth. And to get incompetent teachers away from fifth graders.