

February 18, 2011

To the CAUT Membership,

Canadian Mennonite University thanks CAUT for allowing it to respond to the CAUT report. The following is an effort to continue the dialogue on this important matter.

- 1) Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) considers academic freedom to be fundamental to the life of a university, both in its teaching and research roles. CMU supports CAUT's efforts to defend this principle, especially at a time when academic freedom is under pressure from multiple sides, including the practical impact of government and private grants, dynamics around political correctness and the subtle but real pressure exerted on faculty members by colleagues, departments and the guild.
  - 2) CMU understands itself to contribute to a diversity within the wonderful institution of Canadian post-secondary education. One of the ways CMU does this is by explicitly encouraging its faculty members to take into consideration questions of faith and religion when examining our world. In order to do this CMU expects faculty members at its Shaftesbury campus to self-identify as Christian, and to be committed to reflecting on how their faith and practice interact with their discipline. CMU does not impose a statement of faith on them, but invites them to affirm the faith tradition within which they place themselves. CMU is committed to the communal search for truth, and grants its faculty members academic freedom as they participate in this enterprise. CMU does not see this to be in tension with academic freedom and the responsibility of each faculty member to pursue his or her research in whatever direction it takes. CMU is persuaded that the advancement of knowledge, as well as Canadian higher education as a system, is best served by not only allowing but encouraging institutions like CMU to thrive, thereby fostering greater diversity among Canadian universities.
  - 3) Influenced by its historic Anabaptist tradition, CMU is committed to serving its Canadian context by highlighting issues around peace and social justice, international development and morality. CMU trusts that by participating in dialogue around these issues it is enriching rather than limiting or impoverishing it. CMU sees the contribution Menno Simons College (MSC) makes as an affiliated college of the University of Winnipeg as a prime example of such participation. Over the past decade MSC has developed into one of North America's largest centres for undergraduate studies in Conflict Resolution and International Development. It is home to *Peace Research*, Canada's only academic journal in the field. CMU was pleased to collaborate with the University of Winnipeg's Global College in hosting, for the first time ever in Canada, the recent Peace and Justice Studies Association annual conference. As recognized by CAUT, CMU does not expect all faculty at MSC to be Christian. MSC faculty are expected to be committed to pursuing questions of peace and justice, and to ask how their "faith, values or worldview" interact with their teaching and research. They are
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explicitly encouraged to do this as they engage other religious and intellectual traditions. In this process they are granted full academic freedom.

- 4) The 49-page CAUT report concludes that “CMU does impose a faith test.” On the one hand, this may be stating the obvious, and could have been reported in one sentence: “CMU does expect faculty at the Shaftesbury campus to be Christian.” On the other hand, it is CMU’s sense that the report does not represent CMU precisely or with the nuance expected of an academic analysis. For example, as stated in the previous point, CMU does expect its Shaftesbury campus faculty to self-identify as Christian, but CMU does not impose a faith test or require a particular statement of faith of faculty, both of which could limit academic freedom in a way self-identification as a Christian does not.
- 5) The CAUT report appears to be an effort to impose a particular understanding or definition of academic freedom upon CMU. CMU understands universities to be places which allow and encourage open discussion of all topics and issues. Within this conversation, debate about how academic freedom is understood and promoted must not be ruled out of order. Presentations made at a conference on academic freedom at the University of British Columbia in 1997 draw attention to the complexity and ambiguity around academic freedom within a contemporary university.<sup>1</sup> The dialogue on academic freedom in Vancouver in early December, 2010 sponsored by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada is a further example. The CAUT report makes no reference to such complexity; it simply takes its understanding of academic freedom to be normative. The way academic freedom is understood is also an appropriate issue for debate, not somehow exempt from disagreement and imposed upon institutions and their faculty members. It might be noted that the notion of academic freedom was originally intended to protect universities from external intervention.
- 6) Perhaps most significantly, the report raises the possibility that sister universities might be encouraged not to have joint academic programs with CMU, or even “other sorts of academic arrangements.” CAUT suggests it is not attempting to sanction CMU, yet this comes across very much like an effort to sanction or marginalize. CMU finds this quite problematic. Is CAUT really suggesting that in our pluralistic world universities should work together only with those with whom they agree? Would CAUT expect universities to discontinue their work with the many international universities who may not share CAUT’s understanding of academic freedom? Or to have no joint programs with community colleges? Currently CMU is involved in dialogue with the faculty at the University of Qom in Iran. In June, 2011 CMU will offer a course for students from that university, and one of its faculty members will teach a course for CMU. Associated with these courses will be structured Christian-Muslim dialogue. As a conservative Muslim university, the University of Qom will not understand or accept academic freedom in the way defined by CAUT. CMU is persuaded that the contemporary world needs increased dialogue and cooperation among people and organizations that do not agree, rather than walls which keep people within their communities of intellectual comfort.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon E. Khan and Dennis Pavlich (editors), *Academic Freedom and the Inclusive University*. Vancouver/Toronto: UBC Press, 2000.



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- 7) In conclusion, the rationale CAUT originally gave for its investigation was transparency and full disclosure. CMU supports such a goal. If there is to be a list of institutions that have a faith expectation of their faculty members, it is only honest that CMU be on such a list. As such a university, CMU contributes to a diversity within Canadian higher education that only benefits Canada and its students. CMU does this with a commitment to academic freedom that is rich and intellectually defensible. But when the report moves on to suggest that Canadian universities should cease cooperating with CMU and other schools which have such an expectation, CMU objects. CMU does not see such a recommendation as consistent with true academic freedom, nor as contributing to greater understanding and peace in a world marked by conflict. CMU is committed to working together with other universities, public or private, in Canada and beyond.

Thank-you. I wish CAUT all the best in its effort to support faculty and strengthen Canada's post-secondary enterprise.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Gerald Gerbrandt'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end.

Gerald Gerbrandt  
President