

Commitment to Academic Freedom Extends Boundaries of Knowledge, Advances Profession

Guy Riekeman, DC, President, Life University

The chiropractic profession is often criticized as being more akin to a religion than a science or professional discipline. Although we know the criticism is unjustified, I can understand its roots. Too often, our colleges, professional organizations and individual practitioners latch on to particular viewpoints regarding chiropractic philosophy and practice, and refuse to consider new discoveries or contradictory views that challenge their beliefs. Some people immediately shut down and take themselves out of the discussion when they hear things contrary to what they believe. In doing so, they turn their philosophy into dogma. That sort of narrow thinking is counterproductive, and slows the advancement of the profession.

As an institution, we have a strong sense of "self" at Palmer. Our pride and clarity of purpose are built on a long and distinguished history of providing quality education to students and service to the profession. We are comfortable with the controversy that comes with the free expression of ideas, open debate and challenging thought. Our faculty and students are critical thinkers who enjoy holding ideas up to the light and scrutinizing them so that only the most valid and productive remain. I firmly believe one of the most important and distinctive qualities of a Palmer education is the open spirit of inquiry in which it is delivered.

From fervent debates among faculty to lively discussions between students and professors, each Palmer campus is alive with individuals who represent a broad spectrum of thought and practice styles. We are committed to nurturing and ensuring a culture of academic freedom in which such individuals can test their hypotheses and hash out their opinions with one another in a culture of free and open examination. I believe there is no better environment in which to learn, and no better way to advance our knowledge or our profession.

Strong Positions Without Dogmatism

The Board of Trustees and leaders of the Palmer Chiropractic University System have strong opinions and positions on key chiropractic issues that we make readily known in the Palmer Tenets and express in our "Triangle of Care." At the same time, however, we stimulate and encourage an open sharing of ideas. The roster of speakers for a typical Lyceum program, for example, provides strong evidence of the broad range of opinions invited to our campuses. Organized into three tracks that reflect the Palmer Triangle of Care, the Lyceum program explores the range of chiropractic from condition-based care to health care to wellness/development care. Other symposia throughout the year explore such varied topics as vaccination, stroke, and new information about the vertebral subluxation. All factions of our community and the profession are given a voice.

Academic Freedom Applied in a Chiropractic Setting

On almost every college campus in the country, you hear the term "academic freedom" tossed around. Most of us assume it is a well-defined concept, with concrete rights attached to it. In reality, academic freedom is more philosophic than legal. Through the years, legal opinions have

been issued from the U.S. Supreme Court asserting that academic freedom is protected by the First Amendment as free speech. In practice, there has been little analysis of exactly how the Constitution protects it. In addition, in actual legal decisions, the courts have generally held that each institution is best equipped to interpret academic freedom for itself.

Higher education institutions have been the primary interpreters of what academic freedom means. The American Association of University Professors and the Association of American Colleges define it in their *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*. The statement asserts: "Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good ... The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition." The statement goes on to clarify that academic freedom entitles teachers to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter that has no relation to their subject.

Academia itself sees prudent limitations to academic freedom, in terms of introducing only material relevant to the course at hand, speaking truthfully and making clear that the professor's opinions are his or her own, and not the institution's. *The Statement of Principles* continues, "As scholars and educational officers, (teachers) should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate; exercise appropriate restraint; show respect for the opinions of others; and make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution."

A Community of Scholars

The level of academic freedom essentially taken for granted on most nonreligious undergraduate campuses is perhaps less common in the chiropractic realm. Many chiropractic colleges founded to advance a particular branch of the profession still view strict furtherance of that founding principle as their goal. On many campuses, for example, at least one of the student chapters of our national political organizations is forbidden. Some of the traditionally "straight" schools will not allow a student American Chiropractic Association (ACA) chapter. Other broad-scope schools forbid a student International Chiropractors Association (ICA), Federation of Straight Chiropractors and Organizations (FSCO) or World Chiropractic Association (WCA) chapter. Palmer strongly encourages and supports all student organizations. The student presidents of each group sit on a student council subcommittee, and each has an equal voice. They meet once a month to maintain open lines of communication, plan activities together and foster a sense of unity.

We want students to be exposed to the diversity of thought that characterizes our profession, right on their own campus. Robert Lincoln, a 2002 Palmer graduate, sums it up well: "I chose Palmer because I wanted to be exposed to as many different viewpoints as possible. I held strong views regarding chiropractic philosophy before I entered Palmer, and I wanted to see how they would hold up. I wanted to make sure that if there were something that made more sense to me, I would have a chance to learn about it and evaluate it. I definitely got that opportunity at Palmer."

The Responsibility of "The Fountainhead"

As the namesake and birthplace of chiropractic, and home to the largest student and alumni populations in the profession, the Palmer community has a profound responsibility to serve as a leader. Palmer is arguably one of the most visible and well-known organizations in the profession, and our faculty is at the forefront of advancing chiropractic knowledge. We do not want to be a force that fractionalizes the profession, but one that encourages openness, inclusiveness and tolerance for diverse and rigorous thought. That's not to say, of course, that we see all ideas as equally valid, or that we support all positions within the profession. We do, however, support the

right of qualified practitioners to engage in serious study, research and debate to evaluate the merits of varied concepts and claims. In this way, Palmer can effectively promote vigorous debate and scholarly activity within the profession.

Debate in the Classroom

As the heart and soul of any institution of higher learning, the classroom is where faculty and students must be most free to search for truth. At the same time, we have a responsibility to deliver a coherent education to students that is not disrupted by constant debate, or the introduction of irrelevant topics or fallacious concepts. There is a delicate balance to be struck. To ensure students receive a high-quality education based on the most current knowledge in the field and time-tested concepts, all Palmer students are exposed to a core curriculum known as the "Palmer Package." Within that framework, individual faculty and students have plenty of room to explore contradictory opinions. Individual professors may share strong personal views with students, but they are balanced by opposing views from other faculty, the questioning of classmates, and other course material presented throughout the curriculum.

The broad diversity of thought within Palmer manifests itself in tangible ways, according to Dave Juehring, DC, DACRB, director of the chiropractic rehabilitation department and residency: "If you look at our elective program, the student club system and the range of speakers from 'off-campus,' you see the incredible diversity we foster. It can be challenging, at times, to help students who are exposed to so many different schools of thought pull all that information together and make sense of it. The core curriculum helps ensure each student has a basic foundation to build on, and we take it from there."

Clearly, there are times in each student's education when he or she might feel perplexed by the various viewpoints being presented; for some, such feelings are uncomfortable. I would argue that this process is a critical part of real learning and true thinking. Fourth-trimester student and student ACA President Corey Malnikof says: "Personally, I love to hear the different viewpoints because they make you think and look things up and research. Some students don't question enough; most of the time, faculty is open to it. I think that's a healthy part of education."

Freedom to Think, Question and Learn

Perhaps true academic freedom is not so much a legal concept as it is a culture that develops among faculty, the administration and students. That culture is one of tolerance (if not acceptance) for differences of opinion, methods and style; rigorous intellectual standards that demand ideas be based on sufficient research and critical thought; and an open exchange of views that allows all voices to be heard and considered within a free marketplace of ideas. Students enjoy a more meaningful educational experience when they are exposed to a broad range of viewpoints and styles by different professors, outside speakers and co-curricular experiences, and faculty members are better equipped to advance the knowledge of their discipline when exposed to new information and differing opinions.

As one of the most influential and powerful forces in the chiropractic profession, The Fountainhead must be an exemplar of open-mindedness and free and responsible inquiry. It is incumbent upon us to foster future-oriented thinking that supports our growth. This is the only way to extend the boundaries of wisdom and understanding - and to advance chiropractic.

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