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Opinion-Guest writer

Freedom to debate

Tenure a necessary protection

By Gregory Borse Special to the Democrat-Gazette
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Last October, faculty members of the University of Arkansas System were surprised to read, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, that the members of UA's Board of Trustees were considering university counsel-drafted revisions to the policies that govern faculty tenure and dismissal.

The objections from faculty to the revisions have been legal, technical, and philosophical. Changes to the definitions of "cause" for termination that included language that can be construed to make it possible to dismiss a tenured faculty member for lack of collegiality seemed especially offensive. The idea that the proposal would be retroactive and apply to faculty members tenured under the present policy struck some as unable to pass some very basic legal tests regarding good faith in the negotiation of contracts. Changes in the annual post-tenure review process seemed to be written to make it easier for the UA System to rid itself of meddlesome faculty members--tenured though they might be--for a single instance of "not working productively" with their colleagues toward "University goals" (whatever those might be).

The UA System president and his attorneys assured faculty members that the revisions were in an effort to "clarify" vague language. But a review of those changes makes it clear that the revisions are aimed at actually changing the substance of that policy and thereby weakening tenure protections and altering the relationship between a tenured faculty member and the university system--to the significant advantage of that system.

Traditionally, society grants "the robe" (*i.e.*, the outward symbol of tenured status) to only three kinds of professions: the judiciary, the priesthood, and the professorate. We cannot lose sight of the wisdom of this tradition.

Judges cannot adjudicate the law if they must do so in fear that their decisions will end their careers because current cultural or societal mores will hate what they say. Tenure protects them (and the law, which protects us) against the whims of current taste.

Priests cannot live up to their mandates if they must fear a "committee of the current," or the heckler's veto. If they must so worry, they are not priests, they are politicians. Tenured professors, too, must be allowed to follow the truth wherever it leads them.

Why? Because the cure for cancer must be itself immune from politics.

Tenure protects the professorate to speak freely--even when that speech is deemed by an administration to be offensive to the (sometimes personal) "goals" of university administrators. If the new policies are enacted, it will be easier for any administration to construe, for instance, the writing of this op-ed as not "working productively" in support of university "goals." Oh my.

Tenure protects the most robust disagreement among those of us who share the rarified tenured status--we can disagree with each other, in pursuit of the truth, without fear of repercussions to our livelihood. Non-tenured and tenure-track faculty are not so protected. When I can speak without fear that my speech will put my livelihood in jeopardy, then my peers can truly speak too. As a

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result, our students know that they hear honest and uncensored views--even when, and *especially* when, they run counter to each other and to their own.

Tenure, then, is what produces the actual foundation for the pursuit of the truth in all disciplines and results in real debate and real collegiality. Real collegiality is produced by the freedom to disagree. Anything short of such freedom, of speech and academic pursuit, is fake collegiality and, therefore, fake tenure. So long as the faculty of the UA System are not given the freedom that real tenure protects--as the proposal seeks--our teaching, our research, and our university, professional, and community service are compromised.

Such freedom allows scientific research to pursue the truth where it leads; it allows for the teaching of controversial but essential views in our classrooms; it allows university and community service dictated by individual conscience. Real tenure offers our university students an introduction to the multifaceted world in which truth is debated, argued, contested, and disputed honestly, openly, and freely. Without real tenure, this condition cannot be met in the university setting. And if this condition cannot be met, then the university system cannot succeed in its very reason for being which, the UA System declares, in part, to be "the improvement of the mind and spirit through the development and dissemination of knowledge."

Knowledge of what? If that knowledge is not the knowledge of the truth, then the UA System has no foundational principle and finds itself protecting something, but, whatever it is, it's not the truth. And that's dangerous.

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