

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE ACADEMIC PRESIDENT

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This article is an attempt to describe how college and university presidents who are true believers feel about academic freedom and the measures they take to sustain it. I have no word for those who do not believe in the principle although I concede the right of an institution, such as a church-related college, to define for itself what it considers to be disqualifying heresy, provided it makes its position clear when a faculty member is first engaged.

It is only fair to say that my lines have fallen in relatively pleasant places. My life as a university president was spent in an environment favorable to academic freedom. Not that occasions did not arise calling for its defense before individual trustees and the public, including alumni. But I owe it to my board to say that at no time did it act to infringe on the professional or personal freedom of the faculty. Not all presidents, I realize, are so easily situated and my respect goes out to those true believers in difficult situations who are encountering obstacles of which the faculty are probably but dimly aware. To convince skeptical trustees that the faculty deserves such a special kind of freedom, especially in the less-favored institutions where the tradition is still weak, calls for courage of a high order and provides a stern test of presidential leadership.

I know no college or university president for whom academic freedom is not a recurring source of concern. As chief executive of his institution he bears the brunt of criticisms and attacks by individuals and organizations, often inflamed by super-patriotism or anti-intellectual prejudices and fixations. From time to time all administrations have to defend the library against assaults of self-appointed censors and support the freedom of faculty members and students to espouse unpopular causes. In line of duty a president repeatedly defends the right of the faculty to express opinions and take action in areas over which he exercises no control, although he may feel that his peace of mind would be greater if he could. All presidents and most deans receive letters attacking individual members of the faculty but the true believer answers them without the knowledge of the man complained of. The administrator expects to take the rap, to shelter those under attack, for he knows that academic freedom is diminished and distorted if intimidation, either overt or covert, prevails.

Before discussing how to sustain academic freedom, let us be realistic about what it is. A new president soon learns, if he did not know it when he entered office, that it is a peculiar kind of freedom, of a sort which the honest layman does not encounter in his own business or professional experience. Indeed, on the surface it

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seems to him to contravene those standards of responsibility for the interest of colleagues in the organization and of personal loyalty to the welfare of the institution which he observes in his ordinary business and professional relationships.

Although freed of responsibility for providing the funds for their support, faculties view themselves as self-employed professionals who should be free to practice their profession according to their own consciences and interpretations of the canons of scholarship. Indeed, members of our faculties have condoned—or at least overlooked—conduct on the part of a colleague which would be considered as near treason and just cause for dismissal if committed by a member of a law firm or a medical group. Thus academic freedom differs from the freedom of a doctor who is dependent upon his patients for subsistence or of a lawyer who is dependent upon clients. Academic freedom extends a broad protection to a professor against suffering in pocketbook for what he says, writes, or does.

The academic fraternity has not been too successful in explaining to laymen what this unique thing, academic freedom, is and why it is indispensable to good teaching and the advancement of sound learning. Nor is the general public on its part aware of the degree to which professional standards of scholarship are applied in day-to-day contacts with colleagues and more particularly when the faculties make their recommendations regarding appointments and promotions. The professor is more aware than are most laymen of the self-cleansing influences of colleague appraisals that are quietly going on all the time.

The difficulty of communication between academics and laymen is aggravated by the lack of a common vocabulary by which each can express his point of view to the other. There is still substance to what Woodrow Wilson once termed "the perennial misunderstanding between men who act and men who write," although I believe it to have declined in recent years. Yet by reason of their very natures and the vocations that they follow, the two groups do live in different worlds, worlds which are inclined to think differently, speak differently, and react differently to given situations. A chief role of the president, and one that takes a great deal of his time, is that of interpreter of each group to the other—something broader than the function merely of an honest broker.

Unfortunately, the popular concept of academic freedom too often derives from well-publicized acrimonious cases of violations in which, for the sake of protecting the underlying principle being challenged, the academic man may feel compelled to run to the defense of an accused colleague whose conduct he may not approve and whom, were an honorable alternative open to him, he would prefer not to support. Although the pace-setting institutions respect the right of free expression, as conviction of truth and scholarly proficiency guide the individual, and have developed potent countervailing forces against attacks from outside, the memory of grievous violations of the principle in the past and current cases in which the American Association of University Professors becomes involved serves to keep the aca-

democratic profession alert to an unremitting need to defend its freedoms over the whole professional front.

In defending academic freedom the true-believer president recognizes that it is only one element of a broader need for an unrelenting program of public education regarding the whole educational process in general. Academic freedom does not make sense except as one understands this process. He naturally begins with his trustees. The "modern," more informed, trustee has a much better grasp of the faculty's role in the institution and consequently more sympathy for academic freedom than had his predecessors fifty years ago, but unfortunately not all boards have come to be controlled by men of this school of thought. Nevertheless, we can all find comfort in the fact that the type of trustee that Veblen inveighed against so bitterly fifty years ago is being replaced by a younger generation with a more enlightened point of view. One must add, however, that this evolution has been accelerated by the development by the profession itself of more effective means of self-protection. No president or board of trustees can expect to escape with impunity unhappy national publicity when the faculty's claim for academic freedom has been flagrantly denied. Undoubtedly the fear of becoming embroiled with the faculty and the American Association of University Professors has often counseled caution in applying punitive measures among boards of trustees who have but slight sympathy for the concept of academic freedom.

The farsighted president does not wait for a *cause célèbre* to begin indoctrinating his trustees on this tricky subject. If he postpones doing so until the principle is challenged by some notorious example, the degree of shock suffered may well be reflected in a violent and unsophisticated response to it. Plenty of occasions will arise in the day's work for talking about it with individual members of the board as well as with the board collectively; for trustees as well as the president receive complaints about which they must do something. It was a wise president who warned his regents to be prepared for the day when a member of the faculty might urge an unpopular policy, as, for example, the nationalization of the oil industry, and added that when the time came he would be compelled to defend the professor's right to make his position known.

In this, as in many cases of college or university governance, there is no substitute for a board whose members comprehend the educational process as a whole. To this end, I am heartily in favor of an active, standing trustee committee on education and faculty relations with which the president can deal in more intimate and continuous intercourse in respect to all educational matters than is possible at the more formal meetings of the board, particularly if it is a large one. This committee is the natural group for forming one-half of a joint trustee-faculty conference committee. It is also the natural group, in the absence of an all-university faculty standing committee on appointments and promotions, with which the president may profitably confer when a case arises involving possible separation or early retirement. Some

presidents object to such a trustee conference committee as a matter of philosophy; others more particularly because the faculty group may deteriorate into just a grievance committee. It is natural that it should be a grievance committee on occasion; but even as such it serves a useful purpose. Yet it can be much more than this. As the two sides become better acquainted with each other under the guidance of the president, understanding is enhanced and the president draws strength from the faculty to aid him in achieving his ambitions for his institution. Among the examples of this truth, I recall a decision taken by my board during the McCarthy era. It was that a faculty member who had pleaded the fifth amendment should not be suspended until an offense was judicially established. The action went further by offering to provide legal counsel at university expense if the member desired it. This conclusion was the direct result of an evening's conference between a faculty committee and the trustees' executive committee and the spirit of frank but tolerant discussion which permeated the occasion.

Next to the trustees come the alumni. Contrary to the myth that the alumni are a hair shirt for a president, they are the solid rock on which many a privately sustained college or university has built its position, and more and more the tax supported are enlisting their active financial and moral support. If the institution pays them the compliment of assuming that they are interested in its high purposes, a gratifying and influential number will respond accordingly. Since there is no substitute for participation, opportunities should be found for them to help in ways other than financial, ways that carry the attraction of some adult education for themselves. By arranging symposia and seminars for key alumni under faculty leadership, provided faculty participation is wisely rationed and distributed as to constitute no undue burden on any individual, the faculty and the alumni become acquainted with each other and mutual respect is engendered. Old grads who have passed through this experience can be potent defenders of academic freedom, both in general and in particular cases that may arise. An influential layman can on occasion be a more effective popular interpreter of academic freedom than the academics themselves.

As the chief interpreter of the policies of his institution, the president cannot neglect the public at large. As with the trustees, he will find many opportunities for explaining the nature of academic freedom and why it is a necessary ingredient of sound education and research. Again, as with the trustees, he will not await a well-publicized attack upon either his institution or some member thereof.

Many presidents feel that the case for academic freedom would be stronger if the academic profession were to match its protective activities by a more positive role in disciplining colleagues who violate professional standards of teaching and scholarship or who are guilty of incompetence, irresponsibility, or downright neglect of duty. The American Association of University Professors is on record that "the faculty must be willing to recommend the dismissal of a colleague if necessary."

But, while individual faculty members will complain to the president or a dean that so-and-so should be separated from the institution, the president in the last analysis bears the onus of starting the controversy should one arise.

Undoubtedly if the faculties were prepared to enforce their announced code of conduct by formal procedure they would be less vulnerable to criticism for indifference to violations than they are today. But after considerable reflection I have come to the conclusion that the present method of leaving cases of possible separation or early retirement to the initiative of the administration is the better method. Under present systems of academic governance any other method would lead, I fear, to all sorts of acrimony and difficulties. Under any other method, cases which today can be handled confidentially with due regard for the sensibilities of individuals could not escape publicity and campus gossip to the excessive embarrassment of the individual. The aim should always be to secure a quiet resignation when necessary and thus avoid needless cruelty to an individual and his friends.

The right of tenure is correctly viewed as an indispensable element in any system of academic freedom. The sense of security it engenders does in the long run, I am sure, attract faculties of higher calibre than would otherwise be the case, as the life tenure of federal judges helps to give us a national judiciary of higher quality than obtains among our state courts. Yet, to consider its negative aspects, it tends to protect the lazy and incompetent. Many presidents can cite examples in which a faculty member's drive has diminished once he has attained a full professorship. While the achievement of the ultimate rank in academe undoubtedly operates in this manner in certain cases, I am inclined to believe that a fair proportion would have occurred anyway. In short, I am inclined to give more weight than many do to the change that may occur to a man at the time of the male menopause.

It is incorrect to assume that faculty colleagues are indifferent to cases of physical disability, marked emotional instability, or major violations of the moral code. When incompetence is the sole issue faculties are less inclined to support the administration, knowing that the charge has been employed as a cloak to cover the dismissal of individuals whose ideas are unsavory to the trustees and embarrassing to the administration. Nevertheless, if the faculty's counsel is requested in advance and proper trial procedures have been established for disputed cases, it can be anticipated that the faculty on the whole will prove understanding. At such times, the cooperation of a standing faculty conference committee as suggested above will prove invaluable.

In conclusion I repeat what I said earlier, namely, that the issue of academic freedom cannot be factored out as an isolated sector of college and university life. Its defense rests not on itself alone but on a comprehension of the whole educational process. The more constituents of a college or university understand the full scope and nature of this process, the more will academic freedom appear to them as desirable, even indispensable.