

Three Threats to Academic Freedom at Utah Valley University

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Freedom of inquiry, unfettered by political pressure, is the élan vital of the academic enterprise. Professors are professionals, and part of the essence of being a “professional” is possessing public trust. The trust granted to us, the professoriate, is academic freedom. Claims to academic freedom are legitimate if the inquiry furthers understanding of the condition of humanity and/or the processes of nature.

Defense of academic freedom is the central focus of our campus chapter of the American Association of University Professors (UVU-AAUP).

As an issue which transcends the partisan politics of town hall, academic freedom is neither “liberal” nor “conservative.” Inaccurately identified with the left by the right, the brute reality is that no professor is immune from interference, meddling, subversion, and suppression of academic work for non-academic pretexts. Violation of the academic freedom of “conservative” professors is as much as a possibility as violation of the academic freedom of “liberal” professors; that Condoleezza Rice has not been glowingly welcomed to return to Stanford on account of some of her neoconservative positions in the Bush Administration should catch the attention of the former group. The professoriate, regardless of political orientation, must join together in defending the integrity of the academic enterprise by defending the fundamental right to freedom of inquiry. To this end, the UVU-AAUP is categorically apolitical.

What are some current threats to academic freedom confronting the faculty on our campus? Three immediately come to mind.

(1) The “balance” criterion. Prima facie, calls for “balance” appear to be reasonable. It seems sensible that the academic programming of any institution of higher education should be “balanced”—that is, juxtaposing alternate viewpoints for the sake political neutrality—until one realizes that the notion of balance is itself overtly political.

“Balance” is political because “balance” is relative—relative to some political norm. Calls for “balance” at UVU would seem to be a call for rough equality of traditionalist and progressivist viewpoints in the academic program. But this is certainly not what calls for “balance” really mean: locally the term implies something like 80% traditionalist/20% progressivist, or 90/10, or—best—100/0. Therefore, what might pass for “balance” in Orem might make UVU look like the leaning tower of Pisa by national standards, in immediate danger of toppling over. Therefore, since normative equipoise is subjective and culturally relative, calls for “balance” are not constructive.

(2) The “community values” criterion. Since the campus circus springing up around Michael Moore and Sean Hannity in a curious effort at striking “balance” from the spectacle of two extremists, there has been a noticeable, growing sense of entitlement by some local taxpayers and politicians (vide The College Times, November 21, 2005, A3) to intrude in campus matters in open disrespect for professional educators.

Their argument has been, generally, that campus operations, including curriculum development and even the hiring of faculty (vide *The Salt Lake Tribune*, December 9, 2004, and *The Deseret News*, December 11, 2004), should reflect the common morality of the “community”—that is, “community values.” References to “THE values of THIS community” slide easily off the tongue and sound sweet to many ears. But if one is interested in the semantic precision most professors prize, the concept is flawed beyond any hope of repair.

Whether a “community” is defined in terms of geography, religion, language, vocation, or race, the definition is always subject to exception and stipulation. Even cohesive religious communities do not enjoy consensus on primary values. The criterion of identifying a community based on simple similarity is not self-sufficient: a community can only be identified by contrasting it to something else which it is not. Since the sum of individuals living together in a particular location at a particular time will never universally share the same “values,” the notion of a community based on “shared values” is an artifice based on exclusion. The “community” is not a self-sufficient entity, but a precipitate from a plane of multiplicity. Utah County, perhaps disturbingly to some, is no exception.

“Community values” exist nowhere except in the eyes of their political beholders. Around here, the pariahs of “community values” are simply those who by the definition of those doing the defining do not happen to conform to the hegemonic agenda du jour. Worse, to privilege one set of “values” at the exclusion of others directly contradicts the ideal of American pluralism.

Thus, like the abuse of “balance,” the use of “community values” as some kind of normative benchmark for determining the soundness of academic content must be dismissed out-of-hand. The tangible outcome of using “community values” as a standard for curriculum development—such as inserting supernaturalism into the natural science curricula or purging Marx from political science courses—would be the certain loss of accreditation. That would do Utah Valley no good.

I have heard numerous faculty express worry that the rhetoric of “regional university” and “communities of engaged learners” is really a ruse to foist the “community values” criterion onto Academic Affairs and bring syllabi in line with the political and religious agendas of powerful community leaders. Thankfully, no evidence exists—yet—to substantiate these worries. Were evidence to appear, however, such external political interference into the internal operations of Academic Affairs could not be tolerated.

(3) Increasing Ratios of Part-Time Faculty to Full-Time Faculty. Campuses across the nation have seen sharp increases in the numbers of part-time (adjunct) instructors hired instead of full-time tenure-track faculty (vide Alan Finder, “Decline of the Tenure Track Raises Concerns at Colleges,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 2007, A1 passim). Administrators justify the trend by citing tight budgets: part-time faculty often carry full-time teaching loads but are paid only a fraction of what full-time professors earn and are not eligible for benefits.

Aside from the problem of such obvious exploitation, another deleterious consequence lurks: part-time faculty who run afoul of the politics of administrators and powerful community members can be fired easily, the termination explained in terms of financial exigency. The result is that part-time instructors understandably tend to be reticent in expressing themselves on controversial topics or engage in the governance of the institution for fears of retribution.

Willingness to express one's scholarly findings is a function of shared respect within the institutional setting. When a large portion of teachers on a campus do not feel comfortable about expressing their opinions, the vitality of the institution is weakened. The number of part-time faculty at UVU threatens the cultivation of a vibrant academic atmosphere.

These three threats to academic freedom will manifest themselves in different ways in different combinations as we collectively learn what it means to have a public university in the neighborhood. I intuit that this learning process will cause growing pains, like an adolescent entering adulthood, but that we will all be better off for it in the long run.

As your colleague and President of UVU-AAUP, I defend your right—including those of you with whom I respectfully but adamantly disagree—to discuss the findings of your scholarship and research publicly inside and outside of the classroom. I even vow to listen.

The UVU-AAUP has been formed to protect the essential right of academic freedom. Hopefully the chapter will end up being no more than a peer network providing mutual support and organizing an occasional symposium on the necessity of academic freedom for higher education and civil society. But one thing is for sure: without academic freedom, the Academy is gutted and rendered useless. External political pressures continuously eat away at this freedom. These incursions must be repulsed and autonomy of inquiry vigilantly protected.

UVU-AAUP is honored to be part of the UVU Faculty Forum; an autonomous faculty consortium of this kind is long overdue. I personally have been a member of the AFT since I was first hired, have represented my department in Faculty Senate, attended Senate for 18 months as Assistant Vice President, and now have the honor of serving in a leadership role in UVU-AAUP. Each one of us should become engaged in the UVU Faculty Forum to whatever degree our circumstances permit. Only the faculty can be expected to truly look after faculty interests.

It's up to us to stick up for the integrity of our chosen profession.

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