



bill smitherman

More tenure arguments

Since the events of May, 1970 there has been a lot of discussion and argument across the country about faculty responsibility. This has been particularly true in Nebraska where many legislators and Regents have gotten into the act.

Last Spring Regent Robert Prokop of Wilber attacked tenure and called for ending the system. In a statement he said that tenure had shielded academic incompetency and protected faculty members who want to avoid teaching undergraduates.

He added that tenure grants faculty members "freedom from accountability that would be unacceptable for any other profession."

His statement said that faculty members outside the classroom neither deserve nor require protections other than those guaranteed by the U.S. constitution. He also contended that tenure is the only manner in which a man is guaranteed a life-time job, no matter how he performs.

But, though some of his allegations are justified, Prokop has failed to consider the nature of the institution with which he is dealing. This is the fault of most who criticize tenure on similar grounds.

A university is not a retail store, dealing in set goods and services. It is a place where ideas are developed and concepts of society are advanced.

Many of these ideas are unpopular. Indeed, simply presenting both sides of an issue can be unpopular. So, a faculty member engaged in the search for ideas and ideals must have some protection if he is to work effectively.

Tenure has its problems. It undoubtedly does have some abuses. But the system has merits no system of short-term contracts can boast.

The way to remedy the ills of the system is not to kill it, but (if you will excuse the phrase) to work within the system.

There are some alternatives to life-time tenure which have definite merit. University President D. B.

Varner proposed one of these possibilities in his opening remarks to the committee revising University by-laws.

The President suggested a system of awarding tenure for a set period of time. He used five years as an example. At the end of his first tenure period the performance of a faculty member would be reviewed by a committee of his peers, Varner suggested.

If the committee decided that the faculty member was performing effectively then his tenure would be extended another five years.

Varner said this system would both protect faculty members from witch hunts and assure a continuance of tenure as long as a faculty member demonstrated his worth. It would also give the University the opportunity to review performance of tenured faculty, he said.

Varner's idea is only one of the possible approaches, but it is imperative that some system be developed. As the faculty committee on tenure recently reported, "The uninhibited exploration of ideas cannot exist in an atmosphere of intimidation or potential reprisal against ideas that are bold, innovative, challenging and unpopular."

There are also real reforms already in the works that the time has come to implement. For instance, a committee of faculty and administrators has worked out a code of procedures to insure a fair and effective method of removing incompetent professors. The UNL faculty senate has approved this code but the Regents have not acted on it.

A revision of tenure involves many facets and will take time. It must be decided how a professor will be evaluated and by whom. Who will decide the question of competence and what will be the criteria for the decision?

It would be a pity if a system that still looks like it might be effective were arbitrarily destroyed.

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Official issues campus warning

Dr. Alex Sherriffs, for several years on California Governor Ronald Reagan's staff as chief educational adviser, is in a uniquely advantageous position to comment on the changing situation in the academy. Before moving to Sacramento, Sherriffs was both a professor of psychology and an administrator at Berkeley, and so has an intimate knowledge of higher education from the inside. Now, as a public official, he is necessarily aware of the feelings and opinions of both political leaders and of the public at large.

When Eldridge Cleaver, for example, was announced as teaching a course for credit at Berkeley a few years ago, 77,000 letters hit Sherriffs' desk in Sacramento. When arsonists burned the Bank of America branch near the Santa Barbara campus, Sherriffs got 100,000 letters.

In a thoughtful address he gave to a conference of educators at Berkeley, Sherriffs had valuable things to say about the situation of the academy today, and he also issued a warning that should be heeded.

He began by tracing the changing relationship between the academy and the public at large. In 1960, he noted, "the American university could do no wrong and the broadest public support was available merely for the asking." During the ensuing decade this relationship spectacularly soured, and by 1969 the public—and, naturally, its elected representatives—were in a state of disillusionment and even active hostility, having seen "in a society which has liberty as its highest value, and on campuses populated by the intellectual elite of that society, human beings held hostage, buildings burned, bombs exploded, libraries damaged. . . . On several campuses, terroristic tactics were developed to intimidate faculty members who did not conform to a 'Cambodia syndrome.'"

The academic year just past saw a recovery of a measure of sobriety. The point here, however, is that "the public knows that what turned the tide away from violence was not affirmative leadership and good management, or response to the public will, but rather a reaction of dismay against the terrible

excesses of spring and summer 1970—Kent State, Wisconsin, and the 'reconstitution' of courses"—i.e., canceling Chemistry 3 and turning it into a symposium on "the fascist government" in Washington.

Despite the campus calm of the last year, Sherriffs concluded, "all of the past is still with us." And he found disturbing and measurable evidence of this in changing public attitudes toward things like "academic freedom" and "tenure." Among Stanford alumni, for example, more than two-thirds now agree with the statement that "academic freedom may be a good thing, but it has become an excuse for unjustifiable behavior by some faculty members."

A solid majority of the public now holds a negative attitude toward academic tenure, an attitude traceable, says Sherriffs, to the fact that "tenure has been the reason given to the public for inability to cope with a highly visible though small number of extravagantly irresponsible faculty members."

Public faith has also sharply declined concerning the university's claim to be an "open forum" for the free discussion of ideas. During the 1960s, "the open forum policy was abandoned and replaced by a continuing series of speakers all within a narrow political spectrum on the far left. On many of the nation's campuses, when speakers did appear representing a liberal, moderate or conservative point of view, they were harassed, interrupted, and often silenced."

The academy clearly cannot sustain itself or maintain its privileges in a consistently hostile climate of opinion, and, despite the calm last year, "the public and its representatives are not likely to accept the luck of historical accident to ensure the survival of precious and expensive institutions. . . . When public confidence does return, it will be because it has been earned."

Lucidly, thoughtfully, Dr. Sherriffs was telling administrators and faculties as the fall term begins: shape up or ship out.

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