

## Remarks by the Faculty and Senate Chair at the Spring 2017 General Faculty Meeting

Although I am privileged this year to serve as chair of the University Senate, today I am speaking as chair of the faculty. I want to take this opportunity to share some thoughts and observations about the current state of academic freedom, both at this institution and in the nation at large. We find ourselves at a historic crossroads. A search is currently underway to find a successor to our current president, Dr. Gogue, who has served this university with distinction since 2007. I recall first meeting with President Gogue soon after his arrival on campus, when he met with the leadership of the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors. During that meeting he affirmed his strong commitment to the principles of academic freedom and tenure, and to the faculty's critical role in shared governance. During the nearly ten years that he has served as president, I have seen him maintain his commitment to those fundamental principles without fail. For this, on behalf of the entire faculty, I wish to express my profound gratitude.

As I reported at the fall General Faculty meeting, when the new presidential search committee was about to begin its work in the fall, I made the point to Trustee Raymond Harbert, chair of the search committee; and Mr. William Funk, head of the search firm, that for the next president to have the full faith and confidence of the faculty, he or she would need to come from an academic background, have risen through the ranks to earn tenure, and to be committed to the principles of academic freedom and its dependence on academic tenure. When the next president is selected by the Board of Trustees, I hope that the faculty's expectations in this crucial matter will not be disappointed.

Most of you present today are broadly familiar with the AAUP's 1940 *Statement on the Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure*, whose principles are enshrined in our *Faculty Handbook*.<sup>1</sup> Because Auburn finds itself at a historical turning point, I would like to review briefly another foundational document, the 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities, jointly formulated by the American Association of University Professors, the American Council on Education (ACE), and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB).<sup>2</sup> This document clarifies the role of the faculty in shared governance. The various regional accreditation bodies, including

SACS, hold universities accountable for abiding by the shared governance standards to which they have agreed. The 1966 statement says: “The faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process.” In other words, the faculty holds the *primary* responsibility—but not the sole responsibility—for all matters relating to teaching and research. These are two of our three central missions at Auburn University. I would interpret the extension component of our mission as also covered by this language, for extension includes both instruction and research in bringing knowledge and expertise to the citizens of this state and beyond.

As the 1966 statement on governance goes on to clarify, “Faculty status and related matters are primarily a faculty responsibility; this area includes appointments, reappointments, decisions not to reappoint, promotions, the granting of tenure, and dismissal. The primary responsibility of the faculty for such matters is based upon the fact that its judgment is central to general educational policy.” This principle means, for example, that deciding the institutional standards for promotion and tenure, as well as the decision of individual cases, must be primarily the responsibility of the faculty, not of the deans or provost. The Senate leadership is currently working with the Provost’s Office in devising a system for the periodic review of P&T standards by the individual departments and units. But the primary responsibility for such reviews must always remain in the hands of the faculty, whose disciplinary judgment is based on their special expertise.

For the current model of shared governance to succeed, it is vital that both the administration and the faculty understand which matters are the faculty’s primary responsibility. But the faculty must also be willing to shoulder its burden in meeting those responsibilities, through their service to departments, colleges, and the university. Yet it will become increasingly difficult to staff committees if the ratio of tenure-line faculty to contingent faculty declines, even as the number of administrators steadily rises.

In addition to carrying out their assigned duties, the faculty must be willing to stand up to any efforts to undermine their responsibilities whenever they are threatened by forces internal or external. There may even be occasions in the future, as there have been in the past, when it is necessary for the

faculty, whether individually or through representative bodies like the University Senate and its committees, to express criticism of how the institution is governed. Indeed, our *Faculty Handbook* affirms the AAUP-endorsed principle that when faculty members “speak or write on matters of public interest as well as matters related to professional duties and the functioning of the University, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline.” The importance of that principle to the health of the university cannot be overstated.

One of the strongest safeguards of this critical component of academic freedom is tenure. I see evidence every day that many of my non-tenure-track colleagues do not feel entirely free to express their views on the governance of their departments, colleges, and the university. In the Senate meeting on March 21, we will be hearing a presentation from Dr. Drew Clark, Director of Institutional Research, on the percentage of instruction carried by non-tenure-track faculty. The *Faculty Handbook* (3.5.1.O) requires that this data be monitored so that the tenure system is not eroded to dangerous levels at Auburn. Tenure is, to put it simply, the strongest guarantee of academic freedom. Academic freedom is designed to allow faculty members and their students to pursue the truth in their teaching and research, even if it leads them to unpopular conclusions. Now more than ever, it is essential not only that humanities scholars like myself, but also social scientists and researchers in STEM disciplines be allowed to conduct their research and to pursue the truth no matter where it leads them. Research into climate change, agriculture, health care, technology, race, gender, and sexuality, to name just a few critical areas, must be allowed to proceed without interference from corporate or partisan political interests. The results of such investigations must be allowed to be shared freely in the classroom. That is what universities in this country, at least, are all about.

We certainly live in interesting times. The political temperature in our universities and the nation has probably not been this heated since the 1960s. The First Amendment right to free speech, one of the cornerstones of American civic life, is sometimes placed under extreme stress on colleges and universities, both from the right and the left. I am an avid student of political controversies involving institutions of higher education, and I follow national events more closely, perhaps, than some of my

colleagues. I am proud of Auburn for not having made the national news when a student group sponsored a talk last semester by Milo Yiannopoulos before his sudden fall from grace. You may have heard about the violent demonstrations at the University of California at Berkeley last month that led the university authorities to cancel his speech. (The perpetrators of the violence, according to university spokespersons, were not students.)<sup>3</sup> Just last week students at Middlebury College in Vermont shouted down Charles Murray, author of *The Bell Curve*, and prevented him from speaking.<sup>4</sup>

Such incidents contribute to the widespread perception on the right that universities are bastions of liberal politics, out of step with the views of the electorate. It is true that university faculty on the whole are more liberal than the general population, though it varies by discipline. However, peer-reviewed studies suggest that the consequences to conservative faculty and students of the so-called liberal bias of professors may be exaggerated.<sup>5</sup> Some conservative groups, supported by the Heritage Foundation, are currently engaged in efforts to sponsor legislation to promote campus free-speech bills.<sup>6</sup> Some of you may have seen reports of an Iowa State Senator who recently introduced a bill that would require the three public universities in that state “to base faculty-hiring decisions on applicants’ political-party affiliations.”<sup>7</sup>

The remarks of the new Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, to the Conservative Political Action Conference last month have been widely reported. As she told that gathering of conservative activists:

The fight against the education establishment extends to you too. The faculty, from adjunct professors to deans, tell you what to do, what to say, and more ominously, what to think. They say that if you voted for Donald Trump, you’re a threat to the university community. But the real threat is silencing the First Amendment rights of people with whom you disagree.<sup>8</sup>

The accuracy of her characterization of what goes on in classrooms has been widely criticized by faculty and administrations. But her perceptions are widely shared among conservatives. Given the political conflicts that have intensified during the last several years, there could be no better time for Auburn

University, as an institution of higher learning, to cultivate free speech, academic freedom, and mutually respectful debate. Following the suggestion of a member of the faculty, the Provost's Office will be providing resources to launch a forum that would promote intellectual diversity and democracy. The idea is to sponsor over an extended period of time a series of intellectually diverse speakers. The lectures or panels would involve serious scholars, not pundits. It is more important than ever that people who disagree learn to listen to one another and engage in a serious scholarly exchange of views. Dr. Taffye Benson Clayton, our new Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, is facilitating the organization of this initiative, in which I have been invited to participate as Senate chair. We had our first organizational meeting yesterday, and we will be soon be reaching out to the broader university community, especially faculty and students, for ideas and suggestions for how to proceed with this exciting initiative.

Another positive sign of how Auburn University promotes the exercise of free speech and academic freedom is the student initiative to respond to the original Executive Order banning persons from seven predominantly Muslim nations from entering the U.S. Later during this meeting, Sarah Pitts will provide an update on the situation at Auburn and report on a meeting the students had with administrators last week. Events continue to unfold rapidly, with a new Executive Order being signed just yesterday.

I am of the strong belief that the tenure system in higher education benefits not only the professional interests of faculty members, but the public interest as a whole through the promotion of teaching, research, and outreach, with the goal of pursuing truth, however unpopular it may be at any given time. Yet the public at large has become increasingly skeptical of the professoriate, even if such skepticism is often based on misunderstandings of the work we actually do in the university. Political scientists and sociologists have linked the loss of trust in the professoriate to a larger trend in the rejection of all forms of expertise.<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising, under these circumstances, that academic tenure has recently begun to face threats unlike anything we have seen since the days of McCarthyism. As many of you will already be aware, academic tenure has been attacked in several state legislatures. In Wisconsin the protections of tenure, once enshrined in the state constitution, have been severely eroded.<sup>10</sup>

Legislation has been proposed in two states—Iowa and Missouri—that would end tenure at public universities. The proposal in Iowa, if successful, would take tenure away from professors who had already earned it, whereas the proposed bill in Missouri would lead to no new tenure-track hires.<sup>11</sup> I think it is only a matter of time before some of these measures succeed, though how such laws might stand up in the courts remains to be seen.

The University of Iowa was sanctioned by the AAUP last year for failing to conform to its own institutional standards in the process that led to the hiring of Mr. Bruce Harreld as its current president. The faculty were effectively shut out from meaningful participation in the hiring process. Mr. Harreld, by the way, came from the business world; his only academic experience was as an adjunct professor. It is encouraging that both the Iowa Board of Regents and the University of Iowa president have spoken out publicly against the proposed legislation to abolish tenure.<sup>12</sup> President Harreld issued a strong statement on Jan. 13 defending tenure. He understands that academic freedom and tenure are inseparable: “Cutting-edge research is by definition frequently uncomfortable as it explores new areas and pushes often well-established boundaries. . . . Freedom to push these boundaries is critical and should never be impeded. This freedom is indispensable to our mission of contributing to the common good through our research, scholarship, and creative endeavor, and to ensuring our students’ freedom to learn.”<sup>13</sup> We can only hope that academic freedom and tenure will continue to thrive under the next administration at Auburn University, just as it has under the current one. As faculty we can only hope that the new president, whoever is chosen, will defend academic freedom and tenure before the Board of Trustees, the state government in Montgomery, and the people of Alabama, as tenure faces serious threats in the future, as it almost certainly will. In the meantime, it is incumbent on each member of the faculty to defend academic freedom and to exercise our responsibilities wisely. Thank you for patiently listening to these thoughts on the state of academic freedom this afternoon. When these remarks are posted on the Senate website, they will include links to the sources I have referred to.

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<sup>1</sup> For the 1940 Statement, see <https://www.aaup.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure>.

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<sup>2</sup> For the 1966 Statement, see <https://www.aaup.org/report/statement-government-colleges-and-universities>.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/02/violent-protests-visiting-mob-lead-berkeley-cancel-speech-milo-yiannopoulos>.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/03/middlebury-students-shout-down-lecture-charles-murray>. See also <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/06/middlebury-engages-soul-searching-after-speech-shouted-down-and-professor-attacked>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/27/research-confirms-professors-lean-left-questions-assumptions-about-what-means>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2017/02/01/conservative-libertarian-groups-propose-campus-free-speech-bill>.

<sup>7</sup> See [http://www.chronicle.com/article/Iowa-Bill-Would-Force/239261?cid=at&utm\\_source=at&utm\\_medium=en&elqTrackId=39f67400a77845c5908aae8588a785b8&elq=f0374f078077477482148bb0f05742ce&elqaid=12672&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=5184](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Iowa-Bill-Would-Force/239261?cid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en&elqTrackId=39f67400a77845c5908aae8588a785b8&elq=f0374f078077477482148bb0f05742ce&elqaid=12672&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=5184).

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/24/education-secretary-criticizes-professors-telling-students-what-think>.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-02-13/how-america-lost-faith-expertise?cid=int-now&pgtype=hpg&region=br1>.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/04/07/u-wisconsin-madison-professors-losing-hope-preserving-traditional-tenure-campus>.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/01/13/legislation-two-states-seeks-eliminate-tenure-public-higher-education>.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/01/13/legislation-two-states-seeks-eliminate-tenure-public-higher-education>.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in <http://www.press-citizen.com/story/news/education/college/2017/01/23/iowas-public-university-leaders-rally-around-tenure/96958280/>.