

ACADEMIC FREEDOM / JUN 11, 2015

Statement Defending Tenure and Academic Freedom in Wisconsin

News Topic

Academic Freedom, Advocacy, Employment & Tenure

Thematic

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The American system of higher education is the envy of the world. It's not perfect; few things are. But at a time when many Americans fear their nation may be falling behind competitively, U.S. colleges and universities continue to be universally regarded as the best in the world. The University of Wisconsin system, in particular, is noted for its standards of research and teaching excellence, with the Madison campus recognized among the top fifteen of American public universities by U.S. News and World Report. The University of Wisconsin is a critical contributor to the state's economy that provides exceptional value with its thirteen campuses serving over 180,000 students. With \$1.2 billion of state investment, the system generates over \$15 billion of economic activity.

The undersigned associations of scholars across a wide variety of disciplines are gravely concerned with proposals pending in the Wisconsin legislature that threaten to undermine several longstanding features of the state's current higher education system: shared governance, tenure, and academic freedom.

By situating the locus of control inside the institution, in a partnership between faculty and administrators, the U.S. system of higher education has generated an unmatched diversity that enables students to find the educational environment that works best for them. And by granting faculty tenure after an appropriate period during which their work is rigorously evaluated, we have ensured the continued intellectual vitality and classroom independence so essential to innovation, dynamism, and rigorous scholarship.

Academic freedom is the foundation of intellectual discovery, including in the classroom. It nourishes the environment within which students develop critical habits of mind through encounters with diverse perspectives, experiences, and sources of evidence across disciplines. Our democracy depends on the educated citizens that this system is intended to produce: wide-ranging in their knowledge, rigorous in their ability to understand complicated questions, and dedicated to the public good.

Wisconsin in fact helped pioneer the concept of academic freedom for the entire United States when its Board of Regents declared in 1894 that they would not terminate the employment of economist Richard Ely even though his research and teaching on the benefits of labor unions had offended one of its own members. The Regents' report in the wake of that controversy remains one of the most ringing endorsements for academic freedom in the history of American higher education: "Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere," they wrote, "we believe the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found."

The policies recommended by the Joint Finance Committee and included in the 2016 budget pose a direct threat to academic freedom by expanding the circumstances under which tenure can be revoked (beyond dire financial emergencies and just cause) while simultaneously removing its protection under state statute. Tenure is a linchpin of vigorous shared governance and independent rigorous scholarship. This assault on the structure of Wisconsin's model arrangements poses a threat to the university's stellar reputation and international leadership in research and education—and it betrays a celebrated Wisconsin tradition that began with the Ely case in 1894.

Since 1904, the "Wisconsin Idea" has stood as an inspiring educational model for the entire nation, demonstrating the immeasurable benefits of a robust partnership between the state university and state government predicated on intellectual independence and active engagement by students and faculty members with the wider world. An earlier draft of the current budget bill sought to remove language about the Wisconsin Idea from the mission statement of the university. This most recent draft now poses no less a threat by undermining several of the most important practical pillars of shared governance and academic freedom that have made Wisconsin a beacon among its peer institutions around the world.

Rather than making the University of Wisconsin system more fiscally nimble, the Joint Finance Committee recommendations threaten to damage, possibly irreparably, the distinguished educational system that has justifiably been the pride of Wisconsin residents for more than a century and a half.

Signed,

American Academy of Religion
 American Anthropological Association
 American Comparative Literature Association
 American Folklore Society
 American Historical Association
 American Society of Comparative Law
 American Society for Environmental History
 American Sociological Association
 American Studies Association
 Association of College & Research Libraries
 Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies
 College Art Association
 German Studies Association
 Modern Language Association
 National Communication Association
 National Council on Public History
 Oral History Association
 Rhetoric Society of America
 The Shakespeare Association of America
 The Sixteenth Century Society and Conference
 Society of Architectural Historians
 World History Association