

Gartner's Proposal Would Demolish Academic Freedom

By Lois Cox

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Refreshing as it is in these days of political double-speak to see a proposal for radical change expressed so candidly, former Regent Michael Gartner's bluntness renders it easy to see how his agenda threatens Iowa's public research universities. Specifically, his objections to the faculty's role in university governance fail to take account of the crucial link between shared governance and academic freedom.

Protection of academic freedom is the core mission of American Association of University Professors, one it has pursued for almost a century. In a 1994 policy statement, the association defines academic freedom as the freedom of faculty members "to express their views (1) on academic matters in the classroom and in the conduct of research, (2) on matters having to do with their institutions and its policies, and (3) on issues of public interest generally, and to do so even if their views are in conflict with one or another received wisdom."

Faculty members must have the freedom to question, to imagine, to research, to carry out analysis, and to teach, all without interference based on political dogma or ideological rigidity. Academic freedom has been an indispensable element in the achievements of American research universities — in scientific advancement, technological innovation, artistic creation, empirical research in the social sciences, and intellectual dialogue in the humanities. History has shown that academic work succeeds best in a climate of free inquiry. While administrators and regents make important contributions, this is the unique contribution professors make to a university education.

Freedom of inquiry and university governance are inextricably linked. To the extent that Gartner's approach ignores or denies the "powerful impact" a university's long-range planning, or its budget allocations, or the selection of its leaders have on the quality of a university's teaching and research, he has failed to understand the faculty's role in the university and, more importantly, the university's role in society.

In the academy envisioned by Gartner, academic freedom would occupy a lower rung on the hierarchy of values than top-down decision-making. He is unwilling to tolerate the inefficiencies of collaborative deliberations, even if they lead to the results society expects of the major research universities. The professors' association statement concludes by noting that "[w]hile no governance system can ... guarantee that academic freedom will always prevail, an inadequate governance system — one in which the faculty is not accorded primacy in academic matters — compromises the conditions in which academic freedom is likely to thrive."

Shared governance, as advocated by association as well as by the American Council on Education and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, is essential to academic freedom because it allows faculty members to contribute to the creation of working conditions in which they can be most productive. To deny the faculty at Iowa's research

universities the opportunity to achieve their optimum productivity and share it with their students would be to deprive the citizens of Iowa of that which they have sacrificed for a century and a half to create.

Gartner's haste to make fundamental changes seems ill advised in light of what is at stake.

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