

Iowa City Press-Citizen, Saturday, July 23, 2011

Responding to Michael Gartner

10:05 PM, Jul. 22, 2011

Written by Richard Fumerton, Linda Snetselaar, Christina Bohannon and Ed Dove Guest Opinion

In a recent column, former Iowa Regent Michael Gartner argues that "Iowa's three state universities must change dramatically -- and quickly."

Among other things, he suggests that professors don't teach enough, tenure should be abolished, many course offerings and majors should be "slashed," and the faculty's role in "shared governance" should be eliminated. Although Gartner's column provides little evidence for his conclusions, we feel that it is important to comment on at least a few of the issues he has raised.

Gartner charges that "shared governance institutionalizes mediocrity, stymies change and intimidates presidents." Yet Gartner is short on illustrations of how the faculty abuses its role.

His one example relates to a presidential search of which he was a part. Unfortunately, the faculty who participated in that search, like Gartner, signed a strict confidentiality agreement prohibiting them from making public the discussions that took place.

The faculty will honor that agreement.

We will say, however, that in any organization, including private enterprise, wise leaders consult with members or employees in developing policies that affect them.

At UI, we are fortunate to have an administration that is truly committed to the concept of shared governance. Department chairs, deans, the provost and the president naturally seek advice from representatives of the people who are affected by policy decisions and who must implement those policies.

And although faculty senators are surely flattered by Gartner's perception that the Faculty Senate "basically runs the University of Iowa," the more humbling truth is that it is an elected body that does precisely what it is charged by the university's operations manual to do: "(It expresses) its concern for the welfare of the university, develops and disseminates ideas for university improvement, and contributes to the formation of general university policy."

For example, one of the policies recently developed by the Faculty Senate in collaboration with all levels of administration provides for careful review of the teaching, research and service of tenured faculty.

Although Gartner acknowledges that UI has both a teaching and a research mission, he worries about the amount of time faculty spend on teaching. He notes that many faculty members spend six hours or less each week in the classroom.

It is important to emphasize, however, the enormous amount of time faculty spend preparing to bring to their classrooms the kind of research that provides students a rich educational experience. Outside of the classroom, students stop by our offices, call on the phone and write emails to ask questions and work through the material.

This one-on-one teaching is time-consuming, but it also is an important complement to classroom teaching and one of the things that makes the job so rewarding.

Faculty members also supervise independent study courses with undergraduates and graduate students and direct undergraduate honors theses. They integrate their research and teaching functions by supervising graduate students in the lab and directing dissertations.

In addition, they advise both undergraduates and graduates and monitor carefully the undergraduate and graduate curricula of their departments.

The research of our faculty benefits our fields of expertise, our state, our country and to the educational experience of our students.

Moreover, the worth of a degree to our students is a direct function of the educational reputation of UI, and that reputation is heavily dependent on the research excellence of its faculty. The excellence of our institution depends on our supporting fully not only its teaching mission but also its research mission. It also requires strong support for tenure.

Gartner describes tenure as "once a noble concept to ensure academic freedom" but then says that it is no longer necessary. But the reader is left wondering what has changed in the intervening years that has made the assurance of freedom no longer important.

We share Gartner's desire that UI continue to be an excellent teaching and research institution. We worry, however, that many of the changes he recommends would destroy our ability to compete for and retain the best and brightest academics in the field of higher education.

Gartner is right that UI and all top universities do need to be willing to change. They need to change constantly in response to fascinating developments in human knowledge, and, when necessary, to changing budgets.

But they do not need to change "quickly" and without the thorough discussion that is the product of shared governance.

This column was submitted by the following members of the University of Iowa Faculty Senate: Richard Fumerton (president), Linda Snetselaar (vice president), Christina Bohannon (secretary) and Ed Dove (past president).