

## Do we fear freedom more than we love it?

The office for the College of Arts and Science at Illinois State University is in Stevenson Hall, named for Adlai E. Stevenson II who grew up in the Bloomington-Normal community and was the 31<sup>st</sup> Governor of Illinois. Although he may be best known as our governor, the United States Ambassador to the United Nations during the Cuban missile crisis and for twice unsuccessfully running for President against Dwight D. Eisenhower, we also know him as a champion for higher education. It is appropriate that the Stevenson Center, also here at Illinois State University, bears his name as well because this organization is dedicated to his passions-- public service and global engagement. The Center does inspiring work in community and economic development at both the local and international levels.

While running for President in the early 1950s, Stevenson presented a campaign stump speech on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which gave him an opportunity to reflect on the role of higher education and its relationship to government. A founding principle of the University of Wisconsin system is called the “Wisconsin Idea,” which serves as a model for many state university systems. According to Stevenson in his October 8<sup>th</sup> speech, the Wisconsin Idea is “a faith in the application of intelligence and reason to the problems of society.” He goes on to note that the Wisconsin Idea brings with it a “deep conviction that the role of government was not to stumble along like a drunkard in the dark, but to light its way by the best torches of knowledge.” The “best torches” are on U.S. college campuses where the work is done based upon peer review without government influence. Stevenson noted that if “we value the pursuit of knowledge, we must be free to follow wherever that search may lead us. The free mind is no barking dog, to be tethered on a ten-foot chain. It must be unrestricted in the play of its inquiry.”

It is interesting that in 1952 he felt like this idea was under attack. Attack, in this case, by totalitarian regimes around the world squeezing out academic freedom and the freedom of the press, and at home, as part of over-zealous actions related to the anti-communism movement. Again, in Stevenson’s words, “the whole conception of the free intellectual community is menaced by those who fear freedom more than they love it.” It is ironic that these long-forgotten words of a 65-year-old stump speech are relevant once again.

Legislation in Missouri (sponsored by Rep. Rick Brattin) and Iowa (sponsored by Sen. Brad Zaun) would get rid of tenure for faculty in the state university systems. Other states have hinted at similar restrictions. As we discussed in an earlier column, there is the incorrect notion that tenure protects faculty from termination for any cause. What it protects is the termination of faculty for teaching or researching controversial or currently politically unpopular topics. One of the reasons that US colleges and Universities are the best in the world is because we are free to teach and research all topics without fear of retribution from the current government. If Adlai were alive today, he would no doubt remark that the representatives in Missouri and Iowa, who introduced legislation to remove tenure, fear freedom more than they love it. We hope that these state legislatures will not pass the laws because, knowingly or unknowingly, this is the trademark

of totalitarian regimes. Tenure and academic freedom, like the freedom of the press, are fundamental components of a free and democratic society.

Progress in all fields of study cannot be made if there is not a safe space to challenge current thought and conventional wisdom. Far from being a threat to society, tenure and academic freedom strengthen it. Tenure is, rightfully, difficult to attain. Those who are entrusted with the privilege by their senior colleagues and university have the freedom to explore, discover, and share their findings without restriction. Our freedom depends on it.

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