

This is one of a series of commentaries, *Education Matters*, on various topics involving higher education.

### **Faculty tenure ensures freedom to advance knowledge**

Buried in the controversy over who should appoint Antonin Scalia's successor to the Supreme Court is another argument about the Court's makeup. The February 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Pantagraph* carried an article arguing against lifetime appointments for justices. Historically, the belief is that lifetime appointments ensure that the interpretation of the Constitution is protected from constant change reflecting momentary political whim. Justices must be free to interpret the law as they understand it. The Court's opinions may be unpopular, but justices need to act with integrity without fear of losing their jobs.

This argument hits very close to home for university professors, who cherish one of our most misunderstood and criticized traditions: the tenure system. The "lifetime" appointment of tenure conveys a freedom to the faculty at a university. Academic freedom is most commonly associated with the ability of a faculty member to decide how to teach a course, and to conduct research that may differ from established thought or touch on controversial issues. We don't pretend that our research is as critical as Supreme Court decisions, but the principle is similar. We need freedom to be able to take risks in advancing knowledge.

Academic freedom, and by extension tenure, is not unrestricted. A religious studies professor is not free to turn her New Testament course into a survey of contemporary Asian politics; but a public university would find it nearly impossible to fire the same faculty member if she teaches and writes about an unconventional reading of the gospels. Research can be stopped if it is dangerous or cruel to the research subjects, human or animal; but it cannot be stopped because the results of the research may reveal something that is unpopular to the public, the legislature, or the university itself.

There have been recent high-profile cases of what many view as attacks on academic freedom, some very close to home. Steven Salaita's offer of a tenured position at the University of Illinois was withdrawn in response to anti-Israel comments on social media. Larycia Hawkins, a tenured faculty member at Wheaton College, was suspended for stating that Christians and Muslims "worship the same god." Such a statement might have led to an interesting and spirited discussion of its content, but she was disciplined simply for having said it.

These cases have prompted widespread condemnation in higher education, but there are many other attempts to discipline faculty members that fly under the radar. One of us has seen cases where the state legislature (not Illinois) has called for the firing of a religious studies professor who admitted that he is an atheist, and a political science professor who said that he never votes. These are attempts to remove people because of the content of their thoughts and words, from the very institution that exists for the purpose of

advancing thought.

Academic freedom exists in many countries, but rarely in those under totalitarian rule. It did not exist in the Soviet Union, for example, which expected academic research and teaching to serve the goals of the Communist regime. The goal of attempts to exert external control of professors (from the government, alumni, or citizens at large) is to quash certain kinds of debate. But what makes American universities the source of so much innovative thought is the open give and take of ideas. We expect this among academics and hope for it in our students. Debate is what moves knowledge forward, but this is only possible in an atmosphere that respects the freedom to explore issues from any angle and to challenge any ideas or assumptions. Without tenure, academic freedom would be in jeopardy. Without academic freedom, scholars would fear the kind of argument that is the basis of the discovery of new knowledge, and without argument and discovery, American universities would no longer be the envy of the world.

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[http://www.pantagraph.com/news/opinion/columns/guest-commentary-faculty-tenure-ensures-freedom-to-advance-knowledge/article\\_5cc2de81-54c8-5a66-b74f-10de1c89e586.html](http://www.pantagraph.com/news/opinion/columns/guest-commentary-faculty-tenure-ensures-freedom-to-advance-knowledge/article_5cc2de81-54c8-5a66-b74f-10de1c89e586.html)