

PC Notes
HTS

The relationship between the modern university and society is very complex and fragile because of the university's dual role as society's servant and as society's critic.

Society's support for this dual concept has been ultimately sustained by faith in rationalism, faith in knowledge and science, and the resulting notion of human progress. Perhaps one of the most distinctive ideas of Western civilization is that nature, by itself, cannot achieve its full potential. Rather what is needed is a mutually beneficial interaction among nature, science, and humankind. The university plays an increasingly central role in this process.

Society must continue to preserve the university's essential freedom to remain a critic of existing arrangements--whether in science or society. Our future depends even more on freedom preserved than on full funding retained.

We should not lose sight of the fact that at times academic freedom is threatened not only by forces external to the university, but by our colleagues among the students and faculty with little respect for views other than their own.

Distinctively American traditions in higher education

- 1) faculties and students are responsible to some external community, whether public or private
- 2) American higher education is decentralized and diverse
- 3) Educational and research programs of American colleges serve an unusually wide spectrum of society's needs for highly trained personnel and the knowledge underlying this training
- 4) American universities serve a dual role as both society's servant and society's critic
- 5) Emergence of the tradition of academic freedom during this century shifted power and independence from the central administration and external trustees to the faculty
- 6) America's colleges are extraordinarily accessible to the nation's pool of appropriately qualified and motivated students.

Openness in an Academic Community

The openness of heart and mind is an essential ingredient of university research and teaching programs and a prerequisite of our intellectual credibility.

Indeed, the primary role of the university should be to foster an environment of intellectually disciplined free inquiry and exchange of ideas.

In this environment, each faculty member and student must act as trustee for the value of intellectual openness and the unimpeded exchange of ideas, disciplined only by that careful scrutiny necessary to ensure honesty, completeness, and the use of appropriately rigorous analysis.

Universities are frequently exhorted by various interest groups to take official positions on issues such as military research. Often the groups making such demands are perplexed by the resistance they meet, since they believe their particular perspective promotes the long-term best interest of the human community and, therefore, the university community as well.

The work of the academic community is undeniably related to and supported by a particular set of values, including the value of knowledge, the benefit of fair and open inquiry, the respect for other points of view, and the possibility of human progress.

We must, however, be extremely cautious to adding to this list.

Without a means of distinguishing ideas from ideologies, we may undermine the environment that supports our principal commitments and responsibilities. Returning to an earlier model of moral, political, and scientific orthodoxy would undercut academic freedom and open discourse, transforming the characteristic of higher education and impairing the university's capacity to serve society.

It seems ironic that so many different segments of the political spectrum, including both the left and the right, now want to constrain academic freedom and openness.

A university remains a creative part of society only as long as it remains an intellectually open community and not the ally of a particular point of view.

Tenure

Tenure is one of the chief means by which the academic freedom of individual faculty members, and more broadly, of the university itself is protected. Academic freedom, in turn, is thought to be the essential ingredient that enables a modern university to fulfill its function.

The public has never really understood or accepted the transformation of the modern university into an institution with a fundamental responsibility not only for training and research but for questioning all of society's current arrangements as well. In short, our concern is and ought to be whether the public understands the role and need for academic freedom itself.

Current notions of academic freedom and tenure arose in response to the new and expanded role of the modern university. If that role should again change significantly, academic freedom and tenure would have to be reevaluated.

From the beginning, the trustees, not the faculty, constituted the college or university in the eyes of the law.

As universities began to follow the German model in the late 19th century, the need for a setting congenial to inquiry and discovery led them to the idea of academic freedom. This idea coincided with the establishment of public universities, which would take on an expanded set of functions and responsibilities.

Thus, at American universities, we have yet to celebrate the centennial of academic freedom and the particular institution that supports it, academic tenure. In the sweep of history these are very recent practices indeed.

The concept of academic freedom as a defining ingredient of the modern university reflects the profoundly changed function of universities during the past century...as the belief in the redemptive power of intellectual discovery and insight, of reason and inquiry, began to replace the centuries-old trust in the redemptive power of religious faith.

Universities came to be seen as providing the appropriate setting for such scientific as well as humanistic inquiry. Tenure was designed as the guarantee of academic freedom in that it allowed the objectivity and independence necessary to new understanding, which was itself necessary for human progress.

Should inquiry and change become less central to university-based education and scholarship and other values and objectives take priority, another transformation may be in order. Academic freedom may or may not be a critical component of such a future community.

The contemporary notion of academic freedom is inextricably linked to society's attitudes toward progress and to the role of universities and faculties within such a context.

Our first task as members of the higher education community is not periodic evaluation of tenured faculty members but an evaluation of the general teaching and research environment of the university.

Not least among the internal pressures toward conformity, even toward a kind of orthodoxy, are the rapidly escalating demands of many students and faculty members that their institutions take official positions on various issues.

Sadly, faculties are often as guilty as the public in their intolerance for alternative ideas.

We must once again commit ourselves to attaining openness, objectivity, independence, and variety in the academic setting. If we should fail in this goal, academic freedom and tenure would simply become euphemisms for job security and the status quo instead of ensuring an independent group of scholar-teachers.

Academic freedom is, of course, never absolute. It is instead one of many values that must coexist in an increasingly complex world. Moreover, the phrase "academic freedom" suggests at once too much and too little. On the one hand, it proposed the possibility that teaching and research can be free of constraints. On the other hand, it fails to acknowledge that the ever-present limits on those activities that result from other values that we hold...restrictions of time and resources, professional ethics, establishment procedures and paradigms, the scientific method itself.

Is tenure simply an artifact of the rise of the new science in the 19th century and the consequent change in the role of the university? Will tenure become unnecessary if society finds alternatives to the scientific method or devises other institutions to share the current role of our universities? Clearly, there are already places where scholars without the full benefits of academic freedom and tenure are developing important new insights in many areas.

It is clear that society's continued commitment to progress, change, and the role of inquiry will determine both the future of tenure and the future of the university.