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March 17, 2009

Tenure secures academic freedom

By Aaron W. Hughey

Special to The Courier-Journal

The recent decision to abolish tenure for incoming faculty members within the Kentucky Community and Technical College System is completely misguided and should be considered on parallel with an attack on the First Amendment. As you will recall, the Kentucky House of Representatives passed Resolution 187, which supports retaining tenure within KCTCS. It was forwarded to the KCTCS Board of Regents for their consideration, along with formal resolutions from the faculties of Northern Kentucky University and Murray State University also opposing the proposed action.

The board should have assigned considerably more weight to those documents in their deliberations, and then perhaps they would have recognized the heinous implications of their proposed actions. Tenure was established for purposes related to academic freedom and, regardless of the opinions of some, the reasons for its existence are as valid today as they were when it was first established. Probably even more so.

What KCTCS has done is antithetical to the nature and spirit of higher education -- and just plain wrong. Moreover, the argument that tenure is economically inefficient and limits institutional flexibility simply does not hold up to critical scrutiny.

There are lots of ways KCTCS can deal with the current, temporary financial situation without taking away one of the most important safeguards faculty have against the potential misuse of power by those who are so inclined. The assertion that tenure forces institutions to retain employees who are incompetent or have otherwise outlived their usefulness is equally bogus and without merit.

Admittedly, there are those -- a very small minority -- who achieve tenure and then gradually morph into dead weight. But these are the exceptions, not the rule. In any profession, the best predictor of future performance is always past accomplishment.

We do not live in a perfect world. But we need to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water. Those who like to call for the abolition of tenure typically 1) do not seem to have a clear understanding of why we have it in the first place, 2) do not seem to comprehend the underlying importance of the freedom it is designed to

protect, and 3) do seem to have their own agendas that really have nothing to do with preserving something that is essential to higher education as most of us have come to understand it.

Vietnam notwithstanding, there is also probably something to the "domino" theory when it comes to tenure; i.e., it could set a very dangerous precedent. If KCTCS is successful in abolishing tenure, it would only be a matter of time before the same thing was proposed, in one form or another, by administrators at the eight public comprehensive universities in Kentucky. This would constitute nothing short of a catastrophic attack on freedom of inquiry. The next thing you know, we would be setting up committees, probably on our college campuses, to investigate "un-American" (or at least "un-politically correct") activities.

Don't laugh. This is not as far-fetched as it may seem at first glance. We came dangerously close to this kind of paranoid, security-is-more-important-than-freedom mindset after 9/11. What we need to remember is that as Americans, the most important right we have -- absolutely the most important -- is the right to disagree with those in power.

In the academic world, tenure helps protect the right of faculty to "tell people what they do not want to hear," as George Orwell put it. Edward R. Murrow expressed the same sentiment when we said, "We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty. When the loyal opposition dies, I think the soul of America dies with it."

More often than not, one of the first things people in leadership positions attempt to do is to consolidate their power base by either marginalizing or discrediting those who hold viewpoints that are not in alignment with their own. This has always been one of the trademarks of weak, insecure leadership. True leaders, on the other hand, actively encourage opposing perspectives; certainly, they never attempt to stifle the voices of those who disagree with them.

Admittedly, tenure has some disadvantages, and it is not a foolproof guarantee. Creative, self-centered leaders with their own agendas still spend an inordinate amount of time searching for ways around it or trying to manufacture a means of minimizing its influence. Yet, tenure still provides a protection that is unprecedented in the private sector, and for good reason. If you cannot pursue truth at a college or university, then we have lost something that is fundamental to who we claim to be as a people.

There are those in any organization who would like nothing more than to dictate to others what they should think, feel and act. Tenure gives some assurance that faculty can be free thinkers without constantly having to look over our shoulders or live in fear of what "they" might do to them if we don't "fall in line" with whatever ill-conceived initiative is being promoted at the moment. The most fundamental right we have in academia is the right to tell the emperor that he (or she) has no clothes. We need to guard this right at all costs. Tenure is obviously not an absolute defense

against the wrath of those who would rather not have their true motives exposed, but it does provide some protection.

In any event, this is an issue that needs to be monitored closely, even by those who are not associated with higher education, because there is a lot more at stake here than just the job security of a few people who many consider to be "elitists" anyway. What KCTCS has done, i.e., ensure the slow death of tenure with the KCTCS system, is tantamount to an assault on everything we hold sacred in this country and needs to be recognized as such. We need tenure.

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