

Talkin' 'bout a revolution

University ignores its faculty grievance rules at its own peril.

BY EDDIE ADELSTEIN

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What does the faculty at the University of Missouri have in common with the citizens of Yemen, Syria and Egypt? We all live under a repressive, undemocratic system.



E. Adelstein

We, like they do, deserve better.

The university operates under our constitution, “the collected rules and regulations” that provide the governance for this institution. The administration consistently ignores these rules unless they serve in its interest.

To have academic freedom, the university must provide for certain protections that allow critical thinking and freedom from punishment when new ideas conflict with old. This is the basis of a viable and creative university. There are two mechanisms by which this is achieved. Some faculty members, by virtue of tenure, have some limited protection. Both tenured and non-tenured faculty, however, depend upon the university grievance process for academic freedom and freedom of speech.

A complicated grievance process, which in the past has been peer-group-driven, allows all faculty members to present perceived injustices to peers. In designing this process, time after time, administrative officers and their legal minions have refused to allow a process where the faculty member could win.

Think about that. After well-thought-out arguments based on facts are presented, the deans, chancellor and their legal advisers can summarily rule against the faculty. What kind of Third World dictatorship is any more ruthless than the process here? In a country based on democratic principles, how is it possible a judicial system can be summarily overruled?

This leads to a lack of academic freedom and, for many, limits freedom of speech. Most non-tenured faculty members serve on a year-by-year contract, and three-year contracts are reserved for the highest-qualified, highest-performing non-tenured faculty. These yearly contracts create a giant fear factor that limits academic freedom as well as freedom of speech.

Each department is like a small feudal kingdom run by a chairperson with vast powers. The only recourse faculty members have when they believe they are wronged is the grievance process. However, because this process is so corrupted, some tyrants rule and the best faculty members leave. No wonder we continue to rank low in national surveys of comparable universities.

Clearly in many cases, ruthless leadership is considered an institutional asset and plays a role in the selection of high-level administrative positions. With his background in the corporate world, former UM System President Gary Forsee was considered a prize because he would support a ruthless, highly paid administration that rarely rewarded staff and faculty and made their welfare the lowest priority.

Most successful grievances are in reality a judgment that the collected rules and regulations are the law of the land. Why is the university administration willing to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars through expensive delays, outsourcing to highly paid attorneys and legal threats? It does this because if a faculty member wins, MU administrators would have to adhere to the rules and regulations. They would be culpable for their actions and might actually be fired for breaking the rules.

Currently, most fiscal problems are solved by raising tuition. We are slowly excluding the very population of students this university was created for: smart, hard-working but not wealthy. MU was to serve as a leveling ground for rural Missourians who were not given the advantage of being born rich. Until we become a real democracy where justice is the rule of law and education is available to all who can benefit, we will continue on an intellectual and creative downward course.

We deserve better.

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