

An Exclusive *Illinois Academe* interview with AAUP head (and Illinois AAUP annual meeting keynote speaker) Roger Bowen

ILLINOIS ACADEME: You were forced out of your job as president of SUNY at New Paltz largely because of your refusal to ban a conference on campus dealing with sexuality. Did that encounter make you realize the importance of academic freedom, or did you have a commitment to academic freedom long before that incident?

BOWEN: If only it were so simple. The conference on female sexuality resulted in an investigation by a special commission that clearly stated my defense of academic freedom was both right and appropriate. A couple years later, the new chancellor, Robert King, personally rebuked me for “permitting” “The Vagina Monologues” to be performed on my campus. His rebuke was followed by repeated visits from King’s vice chancellor who likewise had no understanding of or appreciation for academic freedom. SUNY had been taken over by non academicians who had, then at least, strong support from Governor Pataki. The climate was poisonous and inhospitable to academic freedom. Of course such people and such incidents tend to make one more aware that academic freedom is, like democracy, an ideal that requires constant battle and eternal vigilance.

ILLINOIS ACADEME: Geoffrey Stone, in his new book *Perilous Times*, on the history of civil liberties in America, argues that if more university presidents (and the AAUP) had followed the lead of Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago and stood up against McCarthyism, the harm to academic freedom would have been much smaller. Why do you think that college presidents then and now are willing to sacrifice academic freedom in the face of external pressure? And what can be done to convince presidents to defend academic freedom? Should we privately lobby them? Should we lead crusades to have presidents who infringe on academic freedom fired? Should we launch petition drives and letter-writing campaigns? Should we educate presidents about academic freedom before a crisis ever hits?

BOWEN: I think your last question contains the best answer, but, sadly, education does not change the reality that presidents are too seldom answerable to the faculty. Trustees and regents and donors influence presidential behavior far more powerfully than do faculty, and governing boards seem to prefer presidents who are more responsive to “bottom line” issues than to the ethics of the academy. When I was under fire at SUNY, one presidential colleague phoned me and said that he wanted to speak out in support of academic freedom but was afraid of losing his job and added that he hoped I would “understand.” Hutchins was a rarity, alas.

ILLINOIS ACADEME: Lawrence Summers at Harvard is under fire for many things, including his suggestion that women are genetically inferior at math and science. Should presidents be as free as professors to express unpopular opinions without facing sharp criticism or the threat of losing their job? Do they have academic freedom, too?

BOWEN: President Summers forgot, momentarily at least, that the Harvard president occupies a position in the academy with a level of public exposure and interest not unlike the Pope’s position in the Catholic Church. Presidents have a responsibility to choose their words carefully—to self censor, in effect—and they diverge from that responsibility at their own peril. If Summers had addressed issues solely within his field of expertise, economics, he would have been on safer ground. This aside, I rather prefer the New School president Bob Kerrey’s position that says presidents should feel free to address controversial issues, albeit, they should do their homework before speaking on issues outside their expertise.

ILLINOIS ACADEME: Your nemesis from those SUNY days, trustee Candace De Russy, has just announced that she plans to push adoption of the Academic Bill of Rights in New York. David Horowitz has referred to the AAUP as a Stalinist organization because of its opposition to his Academic Bill of

Rights. Do you think his plans to pass this as legislation in Congress and 20 states will succeed, and what can AAUP members do to stop it?

BOWEN: David Horowitz is a wolf in sheep's clothing. He has shamelessly plagiarized from the AAUP's statements on academic freedom, but added a totalitarian codicil that would make government, or university administrators, regulators of speech in the classroom. Here is a conservative who wants a Big Brother government to impose ideological balance, using regulation rather than the marketplace of ideas to guarantee that conservative ideas have a greater presence in the academy. De Russy is Horowitz's feminine doppelganger who believes she is on a holy mission to remake the academy in the image of Lynn Cheney. Who, indeed, in this drama is the "Stalinist"? The AAUP must expose them for their Stalinist agenda.

ILLINOIS ACADEME: The AAUP has been going through a long, gradual decline in membership. What can the AAUP do (both nationally and at campus chapters) to reverse this slide and bring more professors into the organization?

BOWEN: Otherwise put, how can we end academic feudalism? Academics are too divided by their narrow disciplines to show their concern for the wider profession. Right now about 45,000 professors in the AAUP are subsidizing a million academics whose freedom to profess is being constantly challenged by the Horowitz's and de Russy's. Two out of three faculty who phone us for help are non-members. As the AAUP assumes a higher profile in coming to the aid of faculty's academic freedom, more will join.

ILLINOIS ACADEME: An increasing amount of the teaching at many universities is being done by graduate assistants and non-tenure-track faculty. What is the AAUP doing to reach the growing ranks of these kinds of college teachers who have not traditionally been involved in the AAUP?

BOWEN: The national council recently voted to give graduate students full voting rights in the AAUP; and we constantly monitor the growth of contingent faculty and publicize the exploitative working conditions they suffer. At the national level we will have to advocate more forcefully for fully funding higher education, which means increasing the number of tenure lines and converting contingent faculty positions into full-time continuing positions.

ILLINOIS ACADEME: The biggest academic freedom controversy of our time seems to be University of Colorado professor Ward Churchill. I've encountered many people who seem to think that if academic freedom protects him, maybe it's not a good idea. Since no other professor seems to have written anything quite so offensive as Churchill's reference to "little Eichmanns," what would be the harm of investigating and firing just this one professor?

BOWEN: The slope is very slippery. "Little Eichmanns" is indeed offensive to most people's moral sensibilities and Churchill must have been suffering a moral lapse when he wrote those words; or, more seriously, he betrayed his ignorance of history. But the statement itself should not result in an investigation or a termination. Academic freedom also protects his other writings, one of which is a thoughtful attack on "holocaust-deniers." Maurice Isserman's recent essay in the Chronicle of Higher Education asks whether Malcolm X—who uttered words as offensive and advocated violence, something Churchill has not done—would be allowed to speak at Hamilton College today. I encourage readers to look at this essay.