

Academic Freedom at Illinois Valley Community College

By Leo Welch, AAUP VP for the Illinois Conference

I presented a seminar on “Academic Freedom and Tenure” at Illinois Valley Community College in Oglesby on January 6, 2005. In attendance were approximately 70 faculty. In addition, IVCC President Jean Goodnow and VP for Academic Affairs Harriet Custer were also present.

Two recent IVCC policies provided framework for the presentation and follow-up discussion. One was the Academic Freedom Policy which was authored by President Goodnow and a former Professor of Philosophy at IVCC. The Academic Freedom Policy includes the basic tenets of AAUP’s 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure and has been adopted by the IVCC Board of Trustees.

A new directive entitled Community Relations and Marketing Public Communications Procedure restricts the college community’s contacts to the media and general public.

Jonathan Knight, the AAUP Director of the Department of Academic Freedom, Tenure and Governance, reviewed the policy prior to the seminar given by Welch. One part of the directive states, “All inquiries from the media will be referred to the Office of Community Relations and Marketing.”

Knight concluded that because the administration assumed the responsibility for opinions of faculty, it would follow that the administration could alter, censor or sanction these faculty opinions, clearly a violation of academic freedom.

In response to a faculty member’s question about the rights to communicate directly with the media, Welch cited a U.S. Supreme Court decision rendered in 1968. In this case a teacher in a Lockport, Illinois high school, Marvin Pickering, wrote a letter to the editor of a local newspaper criticizing the local school board allocation of school funds between educational and athletic programs.

The board charged that all of Pickering’s statements were false and concluded that the publication of the letter was “detrimental to the efficient operation and administration of the district” and that “the interest of the school requires dismissal.” After a hearing, Pickering was fired. The U.S. Supreme Court overturned the dismissal action that was previously upheld by the Circuit Court of Will County and the Supreme Court of Illinois and the U.S. Supreme Court concluded that Pickering’s right to freedom of speech was violated.

One of the critical components of the U.S. Supreme Court decision was that Pickering’s statements in general were accurate, and his letter did no harm to the interest of the State.

Based on the opinion of AAUP’s Jonathan Knight and also the U.S. Supreme Court decision, IVCC’s policy is in clear violation of the faculty’s academic freedom as well as first amendment rights. Stephen Charry, Professor of History at IVCC, who organized the seminar, remains confident that the media policy can be modified and can be brought into compliance with AAUP principles and IVCC’s own policy of academic freedom and tenure.