

# Academic Freedom and Liberal Education Illinois Conference Illinois State University 26 April 2003



## Jane Buck Ph. D

I am delighted to be here. It is always a pleasure to participate in forums such as this. Just as I was completing my remarks for this meeting, I received the news that the nontenure-track faculty at Illinois State University voted 131 to 79 on Wednesday to be represented by the Illinois State University Nontenure Track Faculty Association, which is affiliated with the IEA/NEA. We wish them well in their upcoming negotiations.

My assigned topic, "Academic Freedom and Liberal Education," is especially appropriate in that the theme of the AAUP Annual Meeting this year is *Liberal Education and Social Responsibility*.

I begin with an assertion: The phrase "liberal education" is a pleonasm; unless it is liberal, what we provide is not an education, but mere vocational training. In my view, the purpose of an education in a democratic society is to prepare individuals to be discerning, rational citizens capable of evaluating the relative merits of competing claims in order to participate meaningfully in society. This view is neither new nor original. According to one ancient historian, W.R. Connor, the first surviving explicit written reference to liberal education dates to the fifth century B.C. Stesimbrotos of Thasos, referring to a successful military commander, said that he lacked a literary education and any "liberal and distinctively Hellenic accomplishment."

Athenian democracy depended upon the free exchange of ideas among free men; women and slaves were not included. And the free exchange of ideas depended upon rhetorical skill, defined not merely as oratorical ability, but the ability to analyze a problem and propose a solution. A liberal education, designed to allow access to political forums, was afforded free men, and technical skills were provided to slaves.

The medieval liberal arts curriculum included rhetoric, grammar, and logic (the trivium) as well as geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music defined as a division of mathematics (the quadrivium). Contemporary notions of a liberal education usually include the humanities and the natural and social sciences. In establishing the National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities, Congress included the following in its definition of the humanities: "Language, both modern and classic; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archeology; the history, criticism, theory, and practice of the arts; and those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods."

A common thread for over two thousand years in the definitions of a liberal education

is the primacy of language. Isocrates in 380 B.C. argued that a liberal education is manifested above all by skill in speech. To this day, measures of intelligence and scholastic aptitude rely heavily on verbal indicators.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the most popular undergraduate major in 1999-2000 was business, with more than double the number of bachelor's degrees—258,000— than the runner-up, social sciences with 127,000. Third was education with 108,000. There were 50,920 English majors. At the master's level, 124,000 degrees were awarded in education, 112,000 in business, and 7,230 in English. At the doctoral level, education again led with 6,800, followed by engineering with 5,400. There were 1,628 in English. Between 1994-95 and 1999-2000, the number of degrees awarded in computer and information sciences increased by 48%.

The results of a study of ten social science and humanities disciplines released in December 2000 by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce pinpointed a major problem: Graduate students and part-time faculty taught more than half of the courses offered in several disciplines. In freestanding composition programs, only 14.6 percent of the faculty were full-time, tenured or tenure-track. Only 36.3% of the faculty in English departments were full-time tenured or tenure-track. Just over a third of foreign language faculty were tenured or tenure-track. Only anthropology, history, and philosophy departments had faculties in which more than half the members were full-time tenured or tenure-track. The balance of the teaching staff were graduate students and full-time and part-time faculty off the tenure-track. Most of the part-time, contingent faculty earned less than \$3000 per course, and almost a third received less than \$2000. These figures document the deplorable truth about the overuse of contingent academic labor and the financial exploitation of part-time faculty and graduate students.

What is the connection between these numbers and academic freedom and liberal education? To the extent that academic freedom relies on tenure for its protection, and a liberal education has a strong humanities and social science component, the alarming trend to staff humanities and social science courses with contingent faculty threatens academic freedom and the quality of a liberal education.

It is not uncommon for contingent part-time faculty to teach as many as six courses per semester at several institutions in order to survive financially. They typically do not keep office hours, because they are not paid to do so, and seldom have offices assigned to them. Students who have reasonable access to contingent faculty outside the classroom are exceptionally fortunate. I emphasize that this is not a reflection on the dedication of the faculty but on the character of the institutions that exploit them.

A corollary problem of their inaccessibility and their employment at multiple institutions is the inability of contingent part-time faculty to provide competent academic advisement. It is a difficult, if not impossible, task for contingent part-time faculty members to be well-informed of the curricular requirements of several institutions. They are seldom invited to departmental meetings and are often unfamiliar with broad departmental objectives or the content of courses taught by others. In large universities that rely heavily on contingent part-time faculty to teach large survey courses, there is often little, if any, discussion between regular faculty and their contingent part-time colleagues concerning the articulation of various components of departmental offerings. Typically excluded from governance structures at every level, and economically exploited, contingent part-time faculty have neither the opportunity nor the incentive to

contribute their expertise to curriculum development.

It is common practice to hire contingent part-time faculty at the last possible moment based on the latest enrollment figures or a personnel emergency, a practice that can lead to the assignment of faculty, who are otherwise well qualified, to courses for which they are only marginally prepared. A few years ago, a colleague was severely injured in an automobile accident during the first week of the semester. The faculty member assigned to one of his courses had never taught the course before and had never taken the course at even the undergraduate level. It is not an exaggeration to say that her students were cheated. In this case, the department had little choice, but when such assignments become standard practice, one must question the institution's integrity.

Contingent part-time faculty tend not only to teach multiple courses, but to teach large sections of lower level courses in disciplines that would ordinarily require frequent writing assignments and essay examinations. The mountains of paper that would be generated make it virtually certain that many overburdened contingent part-time faculty eliminate or reduce the number of such assignments. It is impossible for students to learn to write clearly and coherently without practice and without guidance. Although well-designed multiple-choice tests are superior to subjectively scored essay tests for many purposes, they cannot measure a student's ability to write cogently and to synthesize a body of data into a coherent whole. But the time required to score essay tests with any degree of objectivity militates against their use in large classes.

Vulnerable to arbitrary hiring and firing decisions, the temptation to pander to their "customers" is, regrettably, understandable and a probable cause of grade inflation and lowered standards. Contingent part-time faculty are often evaluated only by their students, because their numbers preclude more thorough peer review. That we allow the opinions of adolescent undergraduates, many of whom perceive themselves as aggrieved customers, to substantially affect or even determine a faculty member's chances for promotion, retention, and tenure is outrageous. I do not suggest that we eliminate student evaluation of teaching, but that we use student opinion cautiously, and primarily for the purpose of providing the faculty with feedback. If my livelihood depends on arbitrary hiring decisions, and my competence is judged by anonymous student evaluations, I know how to guarantee my future—give easy assignments and high grades.

I suggest that colleges and universities adopt the following principles adapted from the AAUP's 1993 report, entitled "The Status of Non-Tenure-Track Faculty."

1. All faculty, including contingent faculty, should have a description of the specific professional duties required of them.
2. All faculty should be evaluated on a regular basis using criteria appropriate to their positions. In other words, the criteria for full-time, tenure-track faculty should not be applied to contingent, part-time faculty.
3. Personnel decisions should be based on those criteria, not on criteria appropriate to another position.
4. Compensation for contingent faculty should be a reasonable fraction of a comparable full-time position and should include fringe benefits.
5. Timely notice of nonreappointment should be extended to all faculty. The AAUP's 1980 report on part-time faculty recommends that part-time faculty "who have been employed for six or more terms, or consecutively for three or more terms," should receive at least a full term's notice of nonreappointment. In no case should a faculty member

receive notice of nonreappointment later than four weeks prior to the commencement of the next term.

6. All faculty members should have reasonable advance notice of course assignments to allow adequate preparation.

7. All faculty should receive appropriate support in the form of office space, supplies, equipment, and support staff.

8. All faculty should be included in the governance structures of the department and the institution.

9. Contingent faculty should be given consideration for full-time, tenure-track positions as they become available.

10. Caps should be placed on the percentage of courses taught by contingent faculty and contingent positions converted to full-time tenure-track positions wherever reasonable

In the words of AAUP's "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure," "Freedom and economic security, hence, tenure, are indispensable to the success of an institution in fulfilling its obligation to its students and to society." When more than half the members of the professorate are denied the opportunity to seek tenure, academic freedom is in mortal danger. When faculty are forced to self-censor in order not to offend their "customers," and to lower academic standards in order to survive, the real victims are students, their parents, higher education, and society.

Students should receive an education that, at a minimum, will teach them to think clearly, to participate in the larger society as informed citizens, and provide the means to obtain a satisfying intellectual life. Even those whose primary purpose in attending college is to obtain marketable professional skills will benefit from the rigorous application of reasonable standards. Employers value literacy, numeracy, disciplined thought, and hard work, qualities that are learned in an atmosphere where faculty are not penalized for demanding the best from their students.

If colleges and universities insist on using the market metaphor, let's think about pushing it to its limit. If students are customers, let them demand a high-quality product, truth in advertising, a list of ingredients, and warning labels. Colleges and universities, in order to achieve or maintain accreditation, should be required to disclose the percentage of courses taught by faculty ineligible for tenure, the disparities between the CEO's compensation and that of junior faculty members, the proportion of the operating budget devoted to instruction, and the compensation of support staff. But let us abandon the language of the marketplace, because our choice of metaphor ultimately determines reality. We should refuse to refer to our students as customers, presidents as CEOs, bursars as CFOs, and professors as content providers. Let us liberate the academy from the corporate hucksters. We are not always right when we speak out, but we are always wrong when we do not.

Jane Buck, Ph.D.  
National President  
American Association of University Professors

<http://www.aaup.org>

We are not always right when we speak out, but we are always wrong when we do not.