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IWU Chapter of the AAUP

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Illinois Wesleyan Chapter of the AAUP

JANUARY 16, 2012

NEWSLETTER

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Loud and Clear

By Mike Theune

On September 16, 2011, the Office of Student Activities held a variety show in the Hansen Student Center intended to feature the artistic diversity of IWU's student organizations. However, Bryn Saunders, one of the poets representing Lyrical Graffiti, the student group at IWU that promotes the art of performance poetry, was not allowed to perform his work. Approximately one-third of the way through his poem, his microphone was intentionally cut off, having been deemed inappropriate for the family weekend event—though no explicit parameters were given regarding what kind of material could be performed.

The week after this event was a difficult, perplexing time—for the students directly involved, of course, but also for other writing students who had heard about this and wondered what it might mean for them, for their artistry and their ability to express themselves freely on IWU's campus. These students also wanted to know what the faculty thought about what had happened. When initially asked this question, I responded that I didn't think that many faculty knew what had taken place, let alone if there was any strong opinion one way or another. I very distinctly sensed that this response was not what the students were hoping for, and I felt that my own method of responding to the event—essentially, meetings with various involved parties, and posting an invitation to faculty to support Lyrical Graffiti at an upcoming event—was not adequate. Something more, something more concerted, needed to be done.

And this is why I'm very glad that IWU's chapter of the AAUP got involved the way it did. The chapter helped notify faculty of what had taken place, composing and disseminating a letter that clearly disapproved of what had happened and that stated clearly what steps should be taken to remedy the situation. This letter, signed by over 30 faculty members, was published on the front page of *The Argus* (in the September 30, 2011, issue), along with the front page story "Faculty condemns recent variety show censorship." Students could see very clearly what a sizeable contingent of IWU faculty thought about this issue.

IWU's AAUP chapter did the vital work of making public a significant event, and then helped to place that event in context, insisting that it be understood and treated as an issue of policy. As a result, in part, of the chapter's advocacy and efforts, the faculty passed a motion during the November faculty meeting to recommend to the Provost that he update the *Faculty Handbook* by including in it the 1990 AAUP statement on Academic Freedom and Artistic Expression, a statement that ensures that student work is protected as well as the work of faculty. The chapter also plans to meet with new Vice President of Student Affairs Karla Carney-Hall to discuss the new statement's ramifications for student affairs.

The responses of IWU's AAUP chapter to Bryn's microphone having been cut off seem to me to be strong, appropriate, and simply necessary. I thank the chapter for its sustained, energetic efforts on behalf of academic freedom and artistic expression at IWU.

Letter by Bryn Saunders

People have a tendency to doubt me when I tell them that the most difficult aspect of poetry for me is performance. The truth is, despite my outgoing nature and the machismo I exhibit in my comedy, I feel uneasy when it comes to addressing the underlying human sentiments that are at the heart of my poems. At its core, my poetry examines the human condition; many times, the issues I am most unwilling to examine, such as mortality, are hidden beneath the façade of the masculine aesthetic.

As a performer, it was disheartening to have my microphone cut off mid-poem. More difficult than this, however, was the blow dealt to my morale. I felt that I was shooed off stage because my poem was misinterpreted as obscene on a superficial level. What I failed to realize was that at the heart of the matter was an issue of free speech.

I am lucky as a poet and performer to have had the support that I did during this censorship debacle. After having been silenced onstage, I had a group of my closest friends (who I will admit, actually laughed at my jokes) who were willing to leave the venue by my side, in support of what my poem was trying to accomplish. I am even luckier, though, to have had the support of Dr. Theune and the AAUP.

In situations such as these, it is difficult to know where to turn, with whom to talk, and if there are any academic repercussions for having chosen to not self-censor my poem prior to its reading. Resiliency was the most difficult part for me, but was made possible by the help of Dr. Theune and your organization. It was simply an issue too large for a student to fight alone.

For this, devoid of all clichés, I owe each and every member of the AAUP, along with Dr. Theune, my utmost thanks. In all sincerity, thank you all: for setting a precedence for future issues regarding free speech, for your swift response to the university within two weeks of the incidence, but most importantly, for guaranteeing future students the right to freely express their feelings.

Review of *For the Common Good* by Finkin and Post

By James Simeone

The AAUP reading group met on September 29, 2011 to discuss Matthew Finkin and Robert Post's *For the Common Good: Principles of Academic Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). The discussion was framed by the censoring, earlier in September, of a student poet in Hansen Student Center. A student had his microphone turned off on the grounds that the poem he was reciting could have been offensive to those parents and children attending the poetry reading as part of Parents' Weekend. Let me discuss the book some before I return to this case.

Finkin and Post clearly explicate the basic principles of academic freedom as developed and currently practiced in the United States. The book is a timely reminder of the important role the AAUP plays as a watchdog organization investigating alleged infringements of academic freedom. Professors need the

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freedom to pursue knowledge fearlessly because new truths about how the universe works or how society impacts individuals often offend existing sensibilities.

Most university faculty in the United States enjoy great autonomy in the selection and promotion of their research topics. Many professors either have tenure or are on a tenure track, which shields them from being fired simply because of the content of their research agenda. Those new to the profession often ask: If professors are employed by boards of trustees, which have fiscal control over the university, why is the hiring and retention of faculty directed by the professors themselves? Is this self regulation justified? Since 1915 the AAUP has argued that it is justified, and the organization offers compelling reasoning.

As the 1915 *Declaration of Principles of Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure* states, "the relationship of professor to trustees may be compared to that between judges of the federal court and the executive who appoints them" (as quoted in *For the Common Good*, p. 34). Finkin and Post argue that this analogy makes sense: "[B]ecause faculty are professional experts trained in the mastery of ... disciplinary practices, they are "appointed" to discharge the essential university function of producing knowledge. In this task they are answerable to the public at large rather than to the particular desires of employers" (p. 35). Like judges, academics have a duty to apply the standards of their profession in the search for truth. This they do to satisfy their own curiosity, but also as a service to the public to further "the common good."

Of course the public can be just as perturbed with the findings of academics as they are of the decisions of judges. Searching inquiry often trespasses on the norms and taboos of a given society. Academic freedom also protects researchers from the censorship that originates with the community at large. Finkin and Post detail the landmark 1929 case at the University of Missouri which involved a questionnaire on sexual practices distributed to students. A group of Columbia townspeople were offended by its explicit wording and focus on "illicit sexual relations" (p. 63). They requested that the university trustees fire the researchers responsible; one was suspended and the other dismissed, but the AAUP investigation defended them and articulated principles that were eventually recognized in the 1940 *Statement of Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure* and later adopted by many universities across the country including Missouri and IWU.

The book reviews the history of academic freedom in the United States, tracing the roots of the concept back to Horace and the motto "sapere aude" (dare to know). The concept was first championed in the modern era by German university professors, who rallied behind Christopher Wolfe after he was banished in 1723 by Frederick William I because of his theological views. Frederick II reinstated Wolfe in 1740 and German universities became protected zones of academic freedom; not coincidentally, they also become leading producers of knowledge thereafter and throughout the nineteenth century.

The Americans who founded the AAUP were influenced by "the German model" in their fight to obtain academic freedom in the United States (p. 24). The organization created "Committee A" in 1915; its first academic censorship report was produced by Arthur Lovejoy whom AAUP president John Dewey sent to investigate the resignation of seventeen faculty members at the University of Utah. Since 1915 the AAUP has evolved standards of academic freedom from the cases these investigations have generated. Last year IWU was honored when Professor Joerg Tiede was appointed to sit on Committee A. His oar will power a boat loaded with nearly a hundred years of case law. And it will be a hard pull because, as ever,

contemporary social forces of certainty and incredulity blow very hard in the opposite direction.

Finkin and Post underscore that the “right” to academic freedom is neither individual nor absolute. The generation of new knowledge is a community effort—as all engaged in a research program will acknowledge. But why isn’t the right to research absolute? Because, like all endeavors in a liberal society, the research endeavor is limited by the harm principle. The need for balancing fundamental values is readily apparent in cases such as Laud Humphrey’s infamous 1970 book *Tearoom Trade*. Humphrey studied the hidden communities among gay men in airport washrooms. He sought the truth fearlessly but at the same time irrevocably harmed the men he outed. To protect against such abuse, the scholarly community responded again with self-regulation: Institutional Research Boards or IRBs.

All this brings us back to the poetry reading in Hansen. Finkin and Post outline the protections that the AAUP has evolved for four distinct kinds of scholarly activity: (1) research and publication; (2) teaching; (3) intramural expression (i.e., university-focused); and (4) extramural expression (i.e., society-focused). Where do artistic productions and expressions fit into this? They don’t—at least not in any obvious way. Thus in 1990 the AAUP addressed the issue in a statement on *Academic Freedom and Artistic Expression*. Because IWU had not yet adopted this statement, and the Hansen censorship indicated that a change was needed, the faculty voted to adopt the 1990 Statement at the November 7, 2011 meeting. This statement notes that while artistic expression can be limited by “reasonable content-neutral regulation of the “time, place, and manner” of presentations Academic institutions are obliged to ensure that regulations and procedures do not impair freedom of expression or discourage creativity by subjecting artistic work to tests of propriety or ideology.”

The devil is in the details. I would argue that university campuses, and especially student centers, should maintain a generous default setting in terms of time, place, and manner restrictions. The default setting should allow students to speak their minds, to recite poetry without fear of being heckled, to think without the intrusive internal checking that prompts self-censorship. The default setting at a place like IWU should be that in all campus locations the search for the truth and creative self expression will be protected, indeed encouraged. All exceptions to this rule should be clearly marked and delineated. Were this approach accepted, the next step should be to communicate the university default setting to all IWU staff.

Spring Dates

January 26, 4pm: Chapter meeting with Karla Carley-Hall, VP for Student Affairs and Dean of Students. CNS E 103.

February 29, 6pm: Open forum for students on the importance of tenure. Location: TBA.

March 1: Nominations for Dougan Award due. Please e-mail nominations to roesner@iwu.edu.

March 2, 4pm: “Occupy Higher Education: Challenging Corporatization on Campus.” Talk by Donna Potts, Associate Professor of English, Kansas State University, and Chair, AAUP Assembly of State Conferences. CNS E 103.

March 22, 4pm: Meeting of the AAUP Reading Group. The book for the spring semester is *Wannabe U* by Gaye Tuchman. Location: TBA.

