

From the *St. Petersburg Times*

Guest Column

Tenure protects due process on campus

By Sherman Dorn, Special to the Times

In Print: Friday, February 26, 2010

The majority of faculty in the United States do not have tenure. They are either part-time adjuncts or non-tenure-track instructors.

And that is a shame, because tenure is vital to provide a core foundation for freedom on our campuses, and it's necessary for Florida's colleges and universities to attract the best faculty in the world.

Last Sunday in *Perspective*, William McKeen, the journalism department chair at the University of Florida, criticized the principle of tenure, claiming that achieving it has become an all-consuming passion among faculty members and that professors, once they are tenured, are no longer beholden to anyone.

He is wrong, based on my experience at the University of South Florida as president of the United Faculty of Florida chapter there. First, there certainly are limits to tenure protections. Just ask the 21 tenured professors at Florida State University who received layoff notices last year.

Tenure is a mechanism to protect due process, not a job guarantee. But more important, without that due process for a critical mass of faculty, Florida's colleges and universities cannot serve the public interest.

Without a system of tenure, Florida's colleges and universities would not be able to attract the scientists and engineers who make discoveries about the universe and invent new devices, or the criminologists, epidemiologists, and anthropologists who help local governments with tough, real-world problems.

And without tenure's protections, professors are less likely to stand up for what needs to be said. It was a tenured economist at Iowa State University (future Nobel Prize winner Ted Schultz) who fought a dairy industry attempt in 1943 to suppress research on the value of margarine in wartime. With few exceptions, only tenured faculty stood up publicly to criticize my administration the last time there was a substantial academic freedom controversy on campus — the clumsy efforts of new university trustees to direct the firing of Sami Al-Arian long before he was arrested or pleaded guilty to immigration charges.

And it was a grievance by a tenured faculty member that struck down illegal restrictions on student Internet use at USF a few years ago, where a poorly worded procedure would have forbidden all use of USF's networks for organizing any religious or political events, including student organizations of all political and religious persuasions.

I wish the main problem facing Florida's public colleges and universities were an occasional tenured colleague who doesn't pull his or her weight. But that's not the biggest problem at USF or other public colleges and universities. The biggest threat to higher education in Florida is a combination of underfunding and chaos.

It's not just colleges and universities that are underfunded. Funding for elementary and secondary schools has dropped significantly since the housing market began collapsing in Florida. Without revenue to replace federal stimulus dollars, Florida's school districts will lay off thousands of teachers in the next 18 months. Massive teacher layoffs will harm the college readiness of hundreds of thousands of Florida high school students.

Florida's university student leaders agree that the main problem today is funding: Last year, student leaders told legislators that they supported increased tuition, not because they wanted to pay more but because they feared what would happen to Florida's universities without a way to stabilize funding.

And the main problems for students? When I talk with my students at USF, they sometimes complain about teachers, but they usually mention other concerns: the balance between school and work, the last accounting or calculus problem set, their health and the health of their families, the cost of textbooks, the debt they face on graduation, and the availability of required courses.

These are the problems of students today in Florida's colleges and universities. They are not William McKeen's imagined world of a thousand Amy Bishops, the University of Alabama at Huntsville professor who was denied tenure and is accused of opening fire at a faculty meeting. Attacks on tenure don't address the real needs of students and faculty at USF, Hillsborough Community College or the other colleges and universities around the state.

Sherman Dorn is the president of the United Faculty of Florida chapter at the University of South Florida and a historian of education.

[Last modified: Feb 25, 2010 06:45 PM]