

From the *Tallahassee Democrat*

Professor Eric Walker makes case for FSU to reverse layoffs

By Doug Blackburn • DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER • June 7, 2010

Eric Walker, a member of the English Department at Florida State University for 26 years, specializes in 18th- and 19th-century British literature.

But for the past year, while also publishing "Marriage, Writing and Romanticism: Wordsworth and Austen After War" — a 304-page critically well-received book — Walker has been intensively studying university politics.

Walker, with a professorial salt-and-pepper beard, is beginning his second year as president of the Faculty Senate, which means he is also a member of FSU's Board of Trustees, the body that oversees the operation of the university.

At Walker's first BOT meeting as a voting member, last June 18, the board unanimously approved a three-year budget that called for laying off 21 tenured and 34 tenure-track faculty — an unprecedented move in the wake of more than \$82 million in reduced support from the state.

Walker has been working ever since to persuade the administration to reverse its decision. He has presided over two unanimous votes by the Faculty Senate calling for FSU to rescind the layoffs, and during recent weeks he has been in communication with the American Association of University Professors, hoping it will have some pull with FSU President Eric Barron and the BOT.

Meanwhile, UFF-FSU, the union representing faculty, is contesting the layoffs and is halfway through a collective bargaining agreement hearing to determine if they will hold up. The Faculty Senate is not a party to the union's grievance, which is scheduled to continue in July.

Walker and the Faculty Senate steering committee are planning to meet this week with Barron to continue making their case on behalf of tenured faculty.

There is no indication that Barron — who was hired in December and had no role in the decision to lay off tenured faculty — is going to change the three-year budget.

"He (Barron) is in a tricky spot," Walker said. "I think the fact that there's this semi-legal procedure going on, if the president's inclined to do anything, it probably won't be until it reaches a conclusion."

Barron, acutely aware of dire budget forecasts for the 2011-2012 school year, when FSU can no longer count on millions of dollars in stimulus money, believes it's important "to protect what we have."

"In the face of a bad year next year, I can't think of anything worse than rehiring people and then saying, 'Woah, that was a bad mistake, we just lost 10 percent of our budget.' It's very difficult to go back at this point," Barron said.

After hearing from Walker, Jordan Kurland, AAUP's associate general secretary, wrote Barron last week, expressing hope that the university will rescind the layoff orders for tenured faculty.

Despite the crippling recession of the past two years, no other university in the nation has resorted to extensive layoffs of tenured faculty, Kurland said. He compared FSU to Tulane University after Hurricane Katrina, when the medical school was flooded and temporarily shut down.

"I don't think you'll find a case of a major research university having to cut anywhere near this kind of magnitude," Kurland said.

Walker acknowledges that AAUP has no authority when it comes to FSU, other than to put the university on a censure list which would result in negative publicity.

"It's not like the NCAA," Walker noted. "They can't take away scholarships or put you on probation."

Barron believes the AAUP, which is devoted to the protection of academic freedom, is misguided in its attempt to get involved in FSU's budget decisions.

"What has occurred at Florida State has nothing to do with academic freedom," Barron said. "It has everything to do with losing more than \$82 million in your base budget, which is where we pay salaries."

FSU's BOT has a scheduled quarterly meeting June 24-25. According to Walker, the 13-member board will once again be told that the Faculty Senate unanimously approved a resolution requesting the BOT rescind the layoffs of tenured faculty.

At the past two BOT meetings, no trustees commented on identical resolutions.

"We'll continue making our case," Walker said.