

Academic freedom

Truth in the ivory tower



and the university

By LJ Evans

An 8-year-old girl was killed in Anchorage in the late 1980s when a mass of icicles broke loose from a roof, crushing her as she played under the eaves. Soon after, Rich Seifert wrote a piece in the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* that criticized the construction methods that had created the deadly conditions.

Alaska builders organizations denounced Seifert because of the article, which he wrote as part of a regularly appearing column.

"They said I was calling them murderers," Seifert says. "I told them, 'But we know how to do this right. We know how to build roofs that won't do this and it's just because of shoddy building practices that this happened.'"

When Seifert, now a professor of engineering, was hired by UAF's Cooperative Extension Service, he says he was told, "We want you to be the people's consultant on energy and building practices. Nobody is buying you. You are the watchdog for technology, to give people good advice about building practices."

Seifert believed he was doing that — using his expertise to promote safe buildings in Alaska — and he stood his ground. The *News-Miner* canceled his column, but his supervisor, the CES director and the university president stood by him.

"I was protected by academic freedom before I even had tenure," Seifert says.

What it is

Academic freedom is a key tenet of university life. It protects the freedom of faculty to teach and research without unreasonable interference or restriction from law, institutional regulations or public pressure. Closely related to it is tenure. (At UAF, tenure may be granted after a probationary period of up to seven years and after completing certain requirements.) Tenure means faculty can be fired only on grounds of serious misconduct, incompetence or misbehavior, not just because the professor

took a politically unpopular stand.

Academic freedom, says biology professor Abel Bult-Ito, "allows faculty to study subjects that may be controversial in society but are nevertheless legitimate research topics that might otherwise have a politician saying, 'Fire that person because of such and such.' It's a mechanism to protect faculty from political interference."

"I have the obligation to teach the [required] subject material," he adds, "but how I teach it and what types of materials I include in the classroom are for me to decide."

"To me academic freedom means artistic freedom. I've never felt the need to shy away from controversy here at UAF."

The guidelines for academic freedom in the U.S. come primarily from the American Association of University Professors, initially in the "1940 Statement of Principles on

Academic Freedom and Tenure," and augmented with other, more recent documents dealing with topics such as electronic communications.

Provost Susan Henrichs says the AAUP guidelines reflect what she believes are the two key aspects of academic freedom: with the right comes the responsibility. Faculty have the right to communicate the results of their research and their opinions about it to students, the public and other faculty members, she says.

"With that also comes the responsibility to be thoughtful, accurate and unbiased."

Faculty must also understand the rules are different in different settings, Henrichs says. The responsibility of an instructor in an introductory course to deal with controversial subjects is different than in an advanced graduate student seminar.

What it isn't

Academic freedom is often confused with freedom of speech, which is protected in the U.S. Constitution. Academic freedom, though, is essentially part of the employment contract between professor and university.

UAF alumni in this story: Bernice Joseph, '88, '98; David Klein, '53; Rich Seifert, '73

“Freedom of speech is a broad right that all people can exercise,” Henrichs says. “Freedom of speech applies to the faculty member also, of course, but academic freedom ... revolves around speech and writing relating to the faculty member’s role as a teacher and researcher.”

Free speech, not free of conflict

Academic freedom and freedom of speech often overlap, especially in a university setting. In 2001 a poem published by a professor at the University of Alaska Anchorage created a firestorm of controversy. Some people felt the poem, “Indian Girls,” by creative-writing professor Linda McCarriston, reflected racist hate speech. Protesters wrote to the English Department chair and the UAA chancellor, demanding an apology.

Mark Hamilton, the president of the University of Alaska statewide system at the time, issued a strongly worded memorandum defending free speech. He urged university administrators to be unequivocal in protecting that right for faculty, students and staff.

“Academic freedom and freedom of speech are so intertwined, it is difficult mentioning one without the other,” Hamilton says. “In this case it was straightforward freedom of speech. The crux of this particular memo was that administrators, trying to be easy to get along with, will get a complaint and say, ‘I’ll check into that.’ My absolute resolute point was there is nothing to investigate.”

A number of UAF faculty members interviewed for this story vividly recalled the incident, and cited it as a reflection of the value placed upon academic freedom and free speech across the university system. “The discussion challenged the thinking not only of the students but the institution,” says Bernice Joseph, dean of the College of Rural and Community Development.

More recently, shortly before UAF’s September 2009 convocation, a religious group on the Fairbanks campus hung an anti-gay banner in Wood Center. A number of faculty members and students were upset, and they asked Chancellor Brian Rogers to have it removed.

Rogers refused, but he addressed the issue in his convocation speech.

“I disagree with the banner, but I also disagree with those who would remove it,” he said. “The university community must

be one where we protect the freedom to speak, even when we find the speech disagreeable.”

The crisis: Project Chariot

“The most flagrant disregard of academic freedom — the worst example I know of at this university — happened in the 1960s,” says Terry Chapin, Institute of Arctic Biology professor and the only Alaskan appointed to the National Academy of Sciences.

In 1958 the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission began to explore the possibilities of using an atomic bomb to create a harbor in northwest Alaska, a project that some university officials strongly supported. The program was named

Project Chariot, a story that author Dan O’Neill brought to light in *The Firecracker Boys*. A number of ecology studies were commissioned from University of Alaska researchers as part of the program, including studies of the subsistence economy of Native groups in that region. Some researchers argued strongly against Project Chariot.

They were fired.

“None of those people were rehired by the university,” Chapin says.

“That was a different era. Bill Wood was the president of the university and he called the shots,” says David Klein, professor of wildlife management, emeritus. Klein joined the university in 1962, right after the Project Chariot crisis peaked, and worked in the same department some of the fired professors had been with. The faculty, almost all on two-year contracts, were under direct control of the president via the deans of the colleges.

“Your contract could be readily terminated. There was no such thing as tenure at that time.”

“This problem wasn’t unique to the University of Alaska, although UA certainly was not a leader in moving ahead with granting tenure and more academic freedom. It was mostly the Ivy League colleges who had tenure and academic freedom, and mostly the state universities who didn’t,” Klein says.

In the years following Project Chariot, things gradually changed. The UA Board of Regents affirmed the principles of academic freedom. The reasons for a termination had to be spelled out, and it couldn’t be just because a faculty member expressed views contrary to those of the public or the administration. Now the concept of academic freedom had real legs to stand on.

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Creative expression

A couple of years ago Carrie Baker, assistant professor in UAF's Theatre Department, directed *The Laramie Project*, a play about the 1998 torture and murder of Matthew Shepherd, a 21-year-old student at the University of Wyoming. During the trial, witnesses said Shepherd was targeted because he was gay.

Baker knew the subject matter of the play was going to be a little edgy for Fairbanks, but she says that made the department even more excited about producing it. She adds that it didn't occur to her to ask higher-ups for approval, because it is her job to choose material she believes will offer a good experience for her students and the community in general.

"To me academic freedom means artistic freedom. I've never felt the need to shy away from controversy here at UAF."

That sense of freedom — that professors at UAF can pursue scholarly work of their own choosing without interference from administrators — was an opinion voiced by several faculty members in interviews. John Craven, professor of physics, emeritus, tempers his positive assessment of UAF with a note of caution.

"Academic freedom is very healthy here. I'm not aware of anything that's really challenging it," he says. "Academic freedom is not necessarily the first thing on people's mind because it hasn't been challenged here in a long time.

"The real test of academic freedom is not now, when things are fine — it's when something occurs that stresses it."



LJ Evans is a writer and editor for UAF Marketing and Communications.



UAF photo by Maureen McCombs.

Speak freely!



■ Academic freedom is so pervasive at UAF that I don't see it. We do have to be very careful with the exercise of its privilege, though, because it's not something that's so pervasive in the corporate world. Because we have the right to speak freely without fear of retaliation, we have a tremendous responsibility to be careful what we talk about. Faculty have an enormous influence on students, and with that comes a heightened responsibility to not take academic freedom for granted but to use it very carefully and strategically.

Charlie Dexter, professor, applied business and accounting

■ When I tell Fairbanks-based faculty that I'm a director at a rural campus, and that our new program in ethnobotany really does incorporate a lot of traditional Native ways of knowing as well as western science, I see people raise their eyebrows to ask, "Is that a real science?" I appreciate the fact there's academic freedom for our faculty to create a program that is a blend of these things.

Mary Pete, director, Kuskokwim Campus

■ In the eight years I've been teaching art at UAF I've never heard about any fallout with anything. Taboo and controversial subject matters are routinely exhibited.

Jamie Smith, adjunct instructor, Art Department

■ People have been getting into trouble for their ideas for quite some time. I think it's likely that some Neanderthals were banished for preaching against the existence of Cro-Magnons. Academic freedom carries the weight of intellectual substance because it presumes expertise, years of careful study and thought, and meticulous research and scholarly insight.

*Ralph Gabrielli, associate professor,
Alaska Native Studies and Rural Development Department*

■ In some sciences a fact is right or it's wrong; it can be tested. ... In a field like philosophy where you may say something that you've reasoned out ... the existence of God or something, there are people with different opinions. There's no way to test with facts. Those are the places where people who strongly disagree can say, "How can you say that? You should be fired!" Because of academic freedom you can say that in a dialogue and you can't be fired.

Cathy Cahill, associate professor, chemistry and biochemistry, and president-elect, UAF Faculty Senate

■ In a university it's important for us to challenge each other's preconceived notions and use good analysis and good critical thinking to expand our knowledge. We can only do that if we give each other the absolute freedom to talk about these issues within our own discipline.

Sine Anahita, associate professor, and chair, Sociology Department

■ Academic freedom gives you latitude in the way you teach and conduct your research. Young faculty ... are conscious of not taking on something too deep that might not result in a publication. Tenure gives more-senior faculty the opportunity to take on the more challenging questions even if they may not be fruitful.

Dana Thomas, vice provost and professor of statistics

■ It's important for each of us to have the academic freedom to say what we believe is true, but there's also a responsibility for the university, its faculty and students to provide information to the public that is useful and clear as possible.

Terry Chapin III, professor, Institute of Arctic Biology, and Biology and Wildlife Department

Tradition of independence

By Matthew K. Reckard

Scholars want academic freedom; universities demand political freedom. The modern university has its origins in medieval Europe, when constraints on intellectual freedom were greater than today. Think Copernicus, whose heliocentric cosmology — and the teaching of it — was heresy, since religious orthodoxy held that the sun revolved around the earth.

The medieval Latin word for a guild was *universitas*. The early universities, like the artisan guilds that evolved at the same time, were largely self-regulating and self-disciplining corporations of people involved in a common pursuit.

Universities had three advantages over trade guilds: greater financial, political and physical independence. Many universities had endowments and political support from wealthy and powerful people. They inherited from monastery and cathedral schools a tradition of independence from civil authority.

And they were mobile. Because universities brought money and prestige to their cities, local merchants, kings and bishops all wanted them. But early universities didn't own buildings. So, if dissatisfied where they were, they simply moved. This happened in 1209 when, following town-gown violence, scholars and masters left Oxford to found Cambridge University.

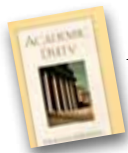


Sometimes, universities demanded privileges and protections as a condition of staying in a city (or moving back). In 1200, to keep them from leaving Paris, King Philip II essentially freed university scholars there from all local civic authority. In 1229, they left Paris anyway. To get them to return, Pope Gregory IX freed them from local church authority, too.

By the 16th century nascent modern nation-states were exerting power over all society, including universities. Famously, in 1530 King Henry VIII coerced Oxford University into approving his divorce from Catherine of Aragon. But remnants of their legal and political power survived and evolved into the American concept of academic freedom. Today's scholars can thank their medieval forebears, who demanded their intellectual right to challenge conventional wisdom.

Matt Reckard spent a formative year of his youth in England when his father was on a university sabbatical. He's been enamored of Oxford ever since.

Further reading ...



Academic Duty
by Donald Kennedy



The Firecracker Boys: H-Bombs, Inupiat Eskimos, and the Roots of the Environmental Movement
by Dan O'Neill

... and links

American Association of University Professors
www.aaup.org/aaup/

Association of American Colleges and Universities
www.aacu.org

University of Alaska Board of Regents policies on academic freedom, see chapter 04.04.010
www.alaska.edu/bor/policy-regulations/

UAF Faculty Senate policy on academic freedom
www.uaf.edu/files/uafgov/fspolicy_acadfree.html

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities standards for academic freedom
www.nwccu.org/Standards%20and%20Policies/Eligibility%20Requirements/Eligibility%20Requirements.htm