

Speech to Faculty
Andrew Koch, Faculty Senate Chair
Appalachian State University, August, 20, 2012

Well here we are for another year. I want to begin today by talking about the big picture, about who we are and the significance of what we do. I want to address why we should be proud of our participation in this mission, about how important it is, and the role our profession plays in history. And why, because of that role, we must strive for excellence inside this institution.

We, who are the educators. We, who are the creators and disseminators of knowledge, are the keepers of civilization.

I mean that quite literally. What student of history is unaware of what happened the last time the light went out. In the 4th century, when the Roman educational system collapsed the knowledge needed to maintain its vast civilization was lost. In Rome, the libraries closed in 380AD. Rome was sacked by the barbarians 30 years later. When that light of learning died, so did civilization itself.

The Western world was plunged into ignorance and superstition for a thousand years. What we do here, and what the educators around the world do, is to try and keep that ignorance at bay.

But that is not always an easy task. Even when Europe began to reemerge from the Dark Ages to push the frontiers of knowledge once again, the task was not made easy. Galileo was arrested. Copernicus was denounced. Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant were banned from writing books about the nature of human existence.

Why, because they challenged the ignorance of the status quo. They developed new ideas and new ways of looking at the world. Such activities not only challenge the positions of those in power, but also the deeply engrained beliefs of the public at large. Who is not aware of the plight of John Scopes, arrested a mere 80 years ago for challenging the public's beliefs.

But despite this, here we are again, ready to embark on another year of that dangerous and subversive act we call education. We are often misunderstood, often unappreciated even by the public that we serve. We are easy targets for politicians who enjoy the benefits of what we create, but often do not want to support our efforts – where we are seen as a burden to strained budgets rather than the core of civilized life. We are easy targets for demigods who like to rail against the free and open society that is both the byproduct of, and a necessary condition for, open inquiry.

And while we are often reluctant to admit it, that makes us different. We are driven by different norms and values than the larger society. We operate under a different paradigm. The pursuit of knowledge cannot be directed by the winds of political fortune. The outcome of what we do cannot be measured by how many widgets we produce in a day. We are not measured by how much wealth we have accumulated or our position in the popular media.

We are the guardians of civilization with human intellect as our guide. We cultivate the tools of reason, regardless of where that reason may take us or how it may conflict with the other norms or accepted truths of the day. That makes us different.

Where we work is different too. We are part state workers and in part autonomous contract workers with a special status. That special status is Academic Freedom. Society has recognized that Academic Freedom is necessary to the mission at institutions of higher learning because without the free exchange of ideas there are no new ideas and without new ideas there is no progress. Civilization will become stagnant, or worse.

For that reason, Academic Freedom must be at the core of every institution of higher learning. History is replete with examples of what happens at the forefront of knowledge when ideas are directed by power and its purveyors. The community of scholars must be free to research, write, and teach to the limits of their understanding. To do any less is to violate the duty that they have to their profession.

Section 600 of the UNC Code States:

- (1) The University of North Carolina is dedicated to the transmission and advancement of knowledge and understanding. Academic freedom is essential to the achievement of these purposes. The University therefore supports and encourages freedom of inquiry for faculty members and students, to the end that they may responsibly pursue these goals through teaching, learning, research, discussion, and publication, free from internal or external restraints that would unreasonably restrict their academic endeavors
- (2) The University and each constituent institution shall protect faculty and students in their responsible exercise of the freedom to teach, to learn, and otherwise to seek and speak the truth.
- (3) Faculty and students of the University of North Carolina shall share in the responsibility for maintaining an environment in which academic freedom flourishes and in which the rights of each member of the academic community are respected

Society has recognized that in order to guard civilization educators must have the freedom to pursue knowledge wherever it takes them. Faculty governance has no higher responsibility than the protection of Academic Freedom.

But that freedom to research and teach, the bringing of new world-views into the classroom, means that sometimes people will be made uncomfortable or uneasy. But education is not pandering to the lowest common denominator. It must raise people up. It is an activity that must challenge, and sometimes that is unnerving. That is the price we pay for a free and open society. In fact, it is how we grow and develop as one.

At this institution, this means that Faculty and Administration should be working together to strengthen Academic Freedom. It is the means by which we further the objective of “excellence” in what we do.

Regarding Administration, let me say this. I like administrators. I know that their jobs are often difficult. The bureaucracy of administration has gotten far more complex over the decades. Would you want to have to fill out forms and push paper in order to satisfy a multitude of federal and state reporting requirements? I know I wouldn't. So on behalf of the faculty, let me say "thank you" to our administrators.

Administrators can help facilitate the material conditions for the teaching and research mission at the university. They can promote and maintain the right intellectual climate, one that fosters the creation and dissemination of ideas, and moves the boundaries of knowledge. This should be carried out with Faculty and Administration working together to promote these objectives.

But such activity requires two-way communication, Faculty and Administration coming together to reach the common goal of excellence in all that we do. We must keep an eye on promoting those structures and processes that strengthen that cooperation.

One change that I would suggest to further this cooperation is for the Faculty Senate Chair to have a permanent seat on the Chancellor's Cabinet. This would assure that a faculty voice can be found at the highest levels of the administration. This can only improve the two-way communication necessary to our collective enterprise.

We have experience here. Over the last 10 years where the faculty and administration have worked together we have produced positive outcomes. When the faculty voice has been ignored, this has often led to problems. Meaningful participation by faculty in the governance of this institution is the key to its success.

Further, when we create rules and procedures for the institution they should be followed. What separates us from those banging on the gates of Rome in 410 AD is that we live according to laws. It is law that turns raw power into authority. Civilized people have encoded their conduct in written documents that define the functioning and the limits of their institutional practices for millennia.

When the rules and procedures outlined in an organizations governing documents are not followed, authority returns to raw power. But history has also shown us that when that occurs, chaos ensues. Chaos is not constructive, but detracts from our mission.

Now, I would like to say something directly to the faculty.

As institutions grow and change they pass certain thresholds in their development. These can produce exciting times, but they can also produce a certain level of anxiety. This is understandable. I believe we are at one of those threshold moments at ASU today and we need to begin the transition to our future. We cannot raise our academic ranking while we remain outside the professional norms and practices that predominate in institutions of higher education. If we wish to conform to the highest standards we need to make some changes.

Some members of the Senate are serving on a taskforce that is working on proposed changes to the Handbook and, therefore, our governing documents. Some proposals will be coming forward this year and will be voted on by the Senate.

The most controversial proposals involve two changes to the committee structures for promotion and tenure. Only one other school in the UNC system does not have a faculty committee above the department to review tenure and promotion and that school is also considering a change. The proposal is for a college level “faculty committee” that will provide additional insight to the dean and the provost from a faculty perspective.

The other component of this proposed change involves the promotion and tenure structure inside the department. The goal is to broaden participation while also taking account of rank and tenure status. The university is a hybrid. It is that rare combination of democracy and meritocracy. Rank and tenure status matter. The proposal at the departmental level also seeks to protect our untenured people from being put in a compromised situation. Let me add that there is no document I have seen that, in any way, seeks to interfere in the content of departmental standards for promotion and tenure. Such a proposal is not on the agenda here.

I know the counter-argument. We are “special.” We do things differently. It’s not the “Appalachian way.” So let me say something to that. Being “special” is not the same as being “exempt.” We are not exempt from the norms and standards in higher education. We cannot close ourselves off and expect to be recognized for our excellence. Really being “special” means having the highest standards and the best practices in the profession. It does not mean you can ignore them.

Our practices do not make us stand out in a positive way. We have to give serious consideration to these and the other proposals coming forward. We need to make some of these changes if we want to raise our academic visibility. I don’t know about you, but I would like ASU to know for something other than being that Division II school that once beat Michigan.

So talk to your Senate representatives. The Senate plans to co-sponsor a forum with Academic Affairs as the components of the various proposals are developed.

In addition, on the Senates agenda for this year is a plan to simplify the curriculum approval process for minor curriculum changes, a discussion of a new general education program, and a look at streamlining the committee structures.

Last year we created a taskforce on due process that is schedule to report in the fall. We will also continue to work on changes to the grievance process.

And finally, let me add that we will work on what you tell us to work on. The Senate is the legitimate representative body of the faculty. I see my role as one of representing the faculty interest. I take that role very seriously. I will pursue what you tell me to pursue.

That does not mean that the Senate should succumb to the loudest voices, but to the majority voice exercise through the legitimate structure that is contained in our governing documents. It is those documents that confer legitimacy on our collective action as faculty.

So my request to you is to do the following: Talk to your departmental representative to the Faculty Senate. Love it or hate it, the Faculty Senate is “the” legitimate means by which the faculty have a voice. Use it.

Thank you for your time.

Now let’s go out there and keep civilization going for another year.