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Academic Freedom in an Increasingly Corporate Model of Leadership

*Karin Mika**

At some point in time, most, if not all, academic institutions became less about producing knowledgeable and educated students and more about profit and public relations. The reality of current academic institutions is that they are now known more for their sports teams, glossy brochures, and multi-million dollar facilities than they are for their quality of experience, education, or even research. Admittedly, much of this shift is the result of economic trends as well as current expectations of incoming students. However, the shift is also the result of various national ranking systems that pit academic institutions against one another in public relations battles.

With this shift has also come a shift in the leadership strategy of academic institutions. Governing Boards tend to favor more of a corporate structure of leadership in academia – a highly paid CEO of sorts who will be the “face” of the institution and will raise funds to enhance a public relations view of an institution, as well as keep the faculty on board with a plan. This leadership structure usually entails running a tight budget in areas where most academics feel the majority of the resources should go – resources that improve teaching, research, and scholarship.

Given the plethora of colleges and universities that exist, and given that all are attempting to compete with each other for the student tuition dollars, colleges and universities find themselves always engaged in a tension between pouring resources into recruitment strategies, and allocating resources for programs and peripheral support. This tension, especially in a time of recession, often results in an undercutting of voices in an academic institution of those who object to some of the methodology of a corporate model of leadership. Those who would ordinarily offer an opinion counter to what is proposed often feel quelled in their speech, either because of a fear that the demise of an academic institution could result in the termination of a career, or that speaking contrary to the management plan will result in ostracization from any position of responsibility in making decisions that affect the future of a school. In many cases, those who speak out against a proffered plan suffer other consequences, such as not being promoted or not receiving a merit raise.¹

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¹ See Joan DeFattore, *Defending Academic Freedom in the Age of Garcetti*, AAUP (Jan.-Feb.

The corporate structure of management in academia poses a severe threat to academic freedom. Academic freedom is most often viewed as writing about or speaking about controversial topics that might be politically unpopular. However, academic freedom is about more than scholarship. Academic freedom, as Stanley Fish points out, entails doing one's job "undistorted by the interests of outside constituencies, that is, of constituencies that have something other than the search for truth in mind."² Admonishing or penalizing those who have a counteropinion on matters related to how a school undertakes its mission in providing intellectual growth and enhancement is definitely an act done for reason other than "the search for truth in mind."³ The free exchange of ideas paramount to the concept of academic freedom should most be promoted and protected when there appears to be a fundamental shift in what academic institutions are regarding as their highest priority. Although economic realities should be taken into account when an academic institution makes decisions about direction and priorities, the freedom to dissent without fear of retribution should be a fundamental right of academic freedom. Not regarding dissent as a seminal part of academic freedom poses a severe threat to the very mission that all institutions of higher learning should have.

2011), <http://www.aaup.org/article/defending-academic-freedom-age-garcetti#.UjxSRdI3uSo>

² STANLEY FISH, VERSIONS OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM: FROM PROFESSIONALISM TO REVOLUTION (forthcoming 2014) (manuscript at 86) (on file with FIU Law Review).

³ *Id.*