

LSU Council of Faculty Advisors Report

February 21, 2025

Dear Supervisors,

This month's faculty report will deviate from our usual format to reflect these extraordinary times. Changes are occurring incredibly quickly across this country and many of them are directly impacting higher education. Given the pace of change, it seems wise to assess the situation using the principle put forward by G.K. Chesterton, an English author, philosopher and conservative critic. The parable of [Chesterton's Fence](#) cautions us to "not remove a fence until you know why it was put up in the first place." This is a reminder that many institutions, processes and policies have been thoughtfully and purposefully developed over decades and in some cases centuries, and if we are to successfully reform them we must first understand the reasons they were created and why they function as they do. I'll address two here today: funding by the National Institutes of Health, or NIH, and academic freedom.

The NIH recently announced they were reducing their indirect cost rates to fifteen percent beginning immediately. These funds are vitally important to universities and others who conduct research as they cover "expenses not directly tied to specific research projects but are essential for their execution" ([The Conversation](#)). According to the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#), the US government began funding indirect costs of universities in 1947 "because of the significant return on investment of this shared partnership which has made the U.S. an international leader in advancing science. We lead in discoveries and innovations that save and transform lives, protect and defend our national security, feed our nation, and ensure our global competitiveness because of it." These sudden and drastic cuts imperil all of these benefits and present a real threat to the ability of universities and their researchers to continue this vital work. The LSU administration is working incredibly hard to address this issue as best they can and I encourage everyone to utilize every option at their disposal to work to protect these vital federal funding sources.

Funding is of course not the only element of higher education under stress. Academic freedom, the key principle guiding every college and university, has also been under increasingly frequent attacks which threaten to undermine their very purpose.

Higher education plays a special role in the life of a democratic state by allowing for the pursuit of knowledge and promotion of civic welfare. It also serves as a pathway for self-improvement for citizens. Importantly, these institutions and their faculty must be protected from external interference in order to fulfill their mission. Agricultural

researchers at public universities, for example, should serve the public good by producing research available to all citizens and not ‘facts’ for the highest bidder. Nor should historians write history only to please current leaders.

The recognition of the need to insulate education from outside influences goes back centuries. For example, David Rabban, a scholar of academic freedom and the First Amendment, writes that the 1819 Supreme Court case *Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward* established that “higher education serves the vital social function of diffusing knowledge, which is essential to the effective operation of American society. And...that external interference can jeopardize the ability of universities to perform this central institutional function.”¹ This board has also endorsed this principle in the [resolution passed on October 10th, 2024](#) which states “Whereas in order to foster free speech and open dialogue, the university should also be a place free of political coercion whether individual or institutional”. Indeed, universities and academic freedom are so important to democratic governance that it is a hallmark of authoritarian movements to target universities and professors to [silence critical thinking](#).

Given its importance, higher education has developed a number of policies and principles to protect the academic freedom of its faculty, with tenure foremost among them. To be clear, every faculty member is entitled to academic freedom regardless of their tenure status. However, it is in tenure that we find its most robust defense.

Tenure is frequently misunderstood. Academic tenure means that an individual’s term of appointment is indefinite and can only be terminated for cause or under extraordinary circumstances such as financial exigency and program discontinuation. It is not a guarantee of lifetime employment or a shield against the consequences for malfeasance, but provides for due process rights which serve as protection against politically motivated attacks on one’s scholarship. Combining the conditions of tenure with the principle that faculty must establish professional standards and adjudicate cases when they are alleged to have been violated, as established in the AAUP’s [1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure](#), is the strongest guarantee we have so far created to remove undue influence from the pursuit of knowledge.

Giving faculty primacy in establishing and enforcing professional standards, since they alone possess the necessary professional expertise, is not unique to higher education; many professions require a similar degree of deference. For example, whether a medical

¹ Rabban, David M. 2024. *Academic Freedom: From Professional Norm to First Amendment Right*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA. p. 42.

procedure was appropriate for an individual's condition and performed correctly is a question for medical professionals and not politicians.

These terms also create other benefits for researchers, universities, and society at large. For example, an indefinite term of employment allows faculty to undertake long-term research whose prospects may be uncertain but whose benefits, if successful, could be immense. We want our faculty swinging for the fences, not playing "small ball". For example, the years long pursuit of gravitational waves, such as at the LIGO facility, or long-term research into the causes of and cures for various medical conditions may not happen if a faculty member's employment is a year-to-year proposition. It is also important to remember that tenure is view-point neutral. It protects all perspectives, from liberal to conservative, and creates stability by preventing faculty from having to change their research and teaching to cater to the preferences of a new administration after every election.

As faculty, we also recognize that the rights afforded us by academic freedom come with responsibilities. For example, LSU A&M's [Policy Statement 15](#) and the AAUP's [1940 Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#) on which it is based specify that teachers should not introduce contentious material which is not relevant to the course at hand. Similarly, the Board's [Bylaws](#) do not allow faculty to "insist upon the adoption by students or others of any particular point of view as authoritative in controversial issues." Overall, LSU faculty and students are expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the great responsibilities and high expectations that come with the privilege of being a member of our academic community.

Listening to the discussion around higher education in the last few years, one might think there was a crisis of faculty misbehavior. Locally, a recent case here at LSU has led some outside commentators to question whether we need to reform or remove tenure altogether. These arguments are misguided.

We do not have a faculty run amok in the LSU system. The recent case which has drawn so much attention, and for which the investigation is still ongoing, is notable because it is so very rare. Our faculty engage in their teaching and research for hundred of thousands of hours each semester across each campus with little fanfare or attention. They do their jobs in the service of their students and the state with dedication and professionalism, and this does not make the news because it is entirely expected. We are professionals and we conduct ourselves as such, and we have trained some of the leaders of this state and country. Furthermore, in the rare case when there is true misconduct, our campuses have policies in place to adjudicate these allegations and terminate the faculty member if it is appropriate.

Attacks on tenure and academic freedom are therefore a solution to a problem which does not exist, and will themselves degrade the value of an LSU degree and drive our best students out of state. Why would they enroll at our campuses if they are not allowed to learn from faculty who can utilize their expertise in a particular subject to craft curricula, but instead relay lessons deemed to be politically correct by policy makers and bureaucrats with no specialized knowledge? The end result of such an effort is entirely predictable. History is full of examples where a country's universities are directly placed under political control by the government and in these cases the children of the elite inevitably end up pursuing their education abroad. We should anticipate a similar outcome in Louisiana if our institutions were to lose their independence, with an increasing percentage of our best and brightest students choosing to continue their education out of state.

While the costs of degrading academic freedom would be catastrophic, the good news is we can avoid them by simply not attacking or undermining the principles and policies put into place to protect it. In fact, maintaining or even strengthening our commitment to tenure and academic freedom would put us at a competitive advantage relative to peers who choose a different path. We do not have to follow their self-destructive choices and instead can benefit by welcoming the faculty they will drive away. The United States was the primary beneficiary of the political turmoil in Europe in the early 20th century which led to an exodus of scientists. Perhaps by maintaining an ironclad commitment to academic freedom while other states hollow out theirs we could land the next Einstein.

Ultimately each of us here today has a commitment to LSU and an obligation to be good stewards of this institution which is so critical to the state of Louisiana. Protecting and strengthening the system requires a firm commitment to academic freedom and the policies which sustain it. There is nothing to be gained from tearing down those fences which divide us from outside influences and their loss could do irreparable damage. We must recognize that one cannot be for free speech but against academic freedom, just as one cannot be for academic freedom but against tenure.

It is time to come to the defense of LSU's core mission, as stated in our founding: to secure, elevate, and advance Louisiana and the world through the generation, preservation, dissemination, and application of knowledge and cultivation of the arts and to develop students who are prepared, confident, and inspired to achieve lifelong success. Our students, our faculty, our staff, our alumni, and our fellow Louisianians deserve nothing less.