

Statement of UW–Madison Research-Award Winners on Tenure and Governance

We write as fortunate past winners of the most competitive research awards the University of Wisconsin–Madison provides to its scholars: Bascom Named Professorships, Hilldale Professorships, Kellett Mid-Career Awards, Romnes Faculty Fellowships, Steenbock Professorships, Vilas Associates Awards, Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professorships, Vilas Early/Mid-Career Awards, Vilas Research Professorships, WARF Named Professorships, and Wisconsin Distinguished Professorships. As recipients of this support, we have been entrusted by our colleagues with responsibility to support the research mission of this great university. That mission is at risk as a consequence of actions taken by the Joint Finance Committee last Friday, which voted to eliminate long-established and universally recognized job protections for tenured faculty and to reduce the role that faculty, staff, and students play in the governance of the university.

The job protections afforded by tenure—earned not through years on the clock but by virtue of having demonstrated excellence in research, teaching, and service—ensure that faculty are free to pursue knowledge and express ideas without fear of dismissal. Such protections, pioneered at Wisconsin in a case that established the importance of academic freedom for the "continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found," are today a fundamental principle of academic life in the U.S. and elsewhere. No scholar would readily accept a position without these protections, and no scholar should be expected to keep it. Without these protections, the University would suffer significant competitive disadvantages.

We are especially concerned about provision 39 of the omnibus motion, which authorizes the Board of Regents to terminate faculty appointments for reasons of "program discontinuance, curtailment, modification, or redirection." This is a profound departure from current policy, which allows termination of faculty appointments only for just cause after due notice and hearing, or in the event of a fiscal emergency. If passed into law, this provision would greatly weaken any guarantees of tenure provided by the Board of Regents. In essence, state statute would say that tenure at the University of Wisconsin does not mean what it means at every other institution: a guarantee that university administrators cannot arbitrarily dismiss faculty who have earned tenure through research, teaching, and service.

Shared governance, the process by which faculty, staff, and students help to guide campus policy, has a similarly rich tradition at Wisconsin. In recent years, this process has helped to improve policy in numerous areas—from elimination of speech codes to reorganization of the Graduate School. Far from inhibiting change, shared governance is part of the way that the University of Wisconsin has effectively adapted to changing circumstances.

We call on Chancellor Blank and System President Cross to forcefully defend the institutions of tenure and shared governance. We respectfully urge the Wisconsin State Assembly and Senate to delete provisions from the omnibus motion approved by the Joint Finance Committee with respect to these institutions, including provision 39. Finally, we appeal to the Board of Regents to adopt as policy existing tenure protections and standards of shared governance.

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