

# Universal standards must be applied at CU

By GARY T. MARX

The University of Colorado Board of Regents granted tenure recently to an individual after it had been denied by departmental peers, and (with near unanimity) college and university-wide committees, the dean, vice chancellor and chancellor. That decision is a victory for politics over truth. For the faculty committees that considered this case, the key issue was performance. For the final decision-makers, the emphasis was elsewhere.

No one disputes the legal authority of the president and the regents to act. However, because there is a legal right to do something does not mean it is the right thing to do. What is troubling about this action is the lack of respect it shows for faculty governance and procedures and the intellectual dishonesty that has accompanied it.

There is certainly room for discussion of what tenure in a state university should be based on. If the president and regents believe that community service and being a role model should be defining criteria in granting tenure, then they must have the courage to say that. They should change the rules to make that possible. Had they done so, they would not have been compelled to offer disingenuous rhetoric regarding procedural errors and alternative kinds of research, nor to fall back on undocumented McCarthyite claims of racism.

The act of publishing some articles is not necessarily an indication of research excellence, nor does it automatically qualify one for tenure. It does not surprise me that undergraduates filled with passion and idealism, as many of us once were, do not grasp that. But for the president of a university not to understand it, to argue that this case involved research excellence and that any lack of consensus about that is just a routine example of healthy disagreement among academics, is the sophistry of demagogues. It masks blatant self-interest under a

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cloak of high principle. In this case the cloak is all too transparent.

In social science as in natural science, there is only one standard of research performance and that is the quality and quantity of a person's work. *This has nothing to do with whether work is theoretical or applied, disciplinary or multi-disciplinary, or whether it speaks to academics or a broader community.*

It has everything to do with peer review and the originality and logic of an approach, the sophistication of its theory and method, the clarity of its presentation, its contributions to knowledge, its impact on the work of other researchers, and its scholarship. The latter includes firmly grounding the work in relevant intellectual traditions, starting with questions rather than answers and considering alternative explanations.

These standards must be applied equally to all. The very word "university" comes from the Latin *universitas*, which means universal. If there is one idea that is at the heart of university culture and the search for truth and beauty, it is universalism. The quest must be open to all and our assessments must focus on the attributes of the creation, not the creator. We must work to strengthen the factors of inclusion and integration and against factors of balkanization and fragmentation.

Fundamental to the original civil right effort was an emphasis on our common humanity, inclusion and fairness. Today this emphasis has been weakened. There is a retreat from universalism in the society and on the campus.

We must acknowledge that persons do not start from the same place and that special efforts are often required to make up for this. If competition is to be meaningful, we must provide resources that permit individuals to realize their full potential. Our society has a very long way to go in doing this. We must also realize that power and knowledge are related and must be sure that seldom-heard voices are fairly represented.

But in doing this we must not forget that what we have in common and we must continue to apply universal standards. To do otherwise involves risks such as:

- offering credence to the racist and sexist claims that excluded groups are incapable of meeting general standards
- the ghettoization, isolation and marginalization of minority issues and the creation of second-class departmental citizens
- lessening the meaning of the achievements of minority persons who meet universal standards
- the spread of the exclusionary and racist doctrine that you must belong to a group in order to fairly evaluate or understand the work of a member of that group
- a reduction in the hiring of minority faculty out of concern that if an individual doesn't perform effectively, he or she would nonetheless be granted tenure
- the spread of the belief that career rewards are something due an individual because of past injustices suffered by a group, rather than something granted because of an individual's current achievements and the subsequent politicizing of what should be professional judgments

- endless litigation brought by dominant group faculty members claiming that they are victims of discrimination because they are held to a different standard
- the danger of further public backlash aimed at reducing current efforts to overcome past injustices.

The strands in a rainbow, or the separate fingers on a hand, are apt metaphors for the rich heterogeneity of American society. We must knit together patches without obliterating seams and do so in spirit of fairness, honesty and cooperation.

Above all we on the campus must assert a principle of equity which holds that persons will be treated equally based upon their performance, not as so often in the past, on the basis of characteristics such as race or gender. To argue for an equity based on anything else is to make a mockery of the highest standards of our society and of the best protection less-powerful groups have.

The broader concern here is not about granting or denying tenure to a particular individual. We all know of cases in which undeserved tenure is awarded or deserved tenure is denied. In the short run universities do not collapse as result of either. The questions of principle and of precedent that are involved here have implications for the future.

Does CU wish to remain a regional university (aided even in that status more by the lack of competition and the mountains, than by supportive actions from the regents or the Legislature), or does it wish to realize its potential of becoming a distinguished national research university?

For the majority of the faculty the answer to that question is clear. Hopefully in the future their efforts and aspirations will receive greater support from those charged with governing the university.

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