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Regional

Higher education becoming a political issue

A few columns ago I predicted that higher education was to become a political issue in the upcoming presidential campaign and the facts have confirmed my suspicions. We have already heard some discussion about the cost of college and how to make higher education free. The latest topic that we are starting to hear about is the issue of tenure.

This issue has just been introduced into the political fray by Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin, who not only has proposed severe budget cuts to higher education in his state, but also called for legislative changes that would give a board largely picked by the governor far more control over tenure and curriculum in the University of Wisconsin system. After his successes in limiting collective bargaining rights for public-sector unions, he now has turned his attention to higher education in a move that many see as a way for him to burnish his conservative credentials. Given that primaries in the Republican Party are dominated by the most conservative voters, we might expect to see a competition among candidates for bragging rights as to who looks “tougher” on higher education, just as both Republicans and Democrats did decades ago regarding communism.

The excuse to modify the concept of tenure and curriculum control is that the leadership of colleges and universities needs to encourage savings and efficiency at a moment when the state is aiming to cut spending to balance its budget.

Conservatives, for the most part, have never been sympathetic toward the institution of tenure, partic-

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ularly in higher education. In part it is because they see colleges and universities as strongholds of political liberalism. When it comes to the excuse of saving money, we must remember that the very reason why there is a shortfall in budgets for higher education in many states is not because of a recession (that is now a thing of the past), but because of irresponsible tax cuts that have affected not only education in general but all kinds of public services including essential ones such as infrastructure.

As we might have expected, the professorate has already sounded the alarm despite the fact that the number of faculty who are tenured or in tenure track positions is decreasing because of the growth in the number of adjuncts, that is, professors without tenure or the possibility to enter the tenure system. Currently only about 20 percent of college professors are part of the tenure system, down from 45 percent in 1975.

But tenure is not the only provision under threat. The concept of “shared governance,” basically the ability for faculty to have direct influence in areas such as what to teach, how to teach it and on other aspects of university life, is also in peril. The new Wisconsin legislation will debase those faculty prerogatives to a “subordinate” status. In other words, no matter what they think the final decisions will always be in the hands of boards and top administrators.

Many have pointed out that a governor who is a college dropout and has little understanding of how higher education works is the one proposing these higher education reforms. But let’s face it. That is not the crux of the problem. Institutions of higher education in general – and their faculty in particular – have done a poor job of explaining and defending how postsecondary institutions work and why it matters to maintain certain traditions that have been in place since universities were created centuries ago. And beyond rhetoric, they have not been very effective in countering the movement of running those universities as if they were simply businesses.

To begin with, tenure is usually portrayed as a labor issue, i.e., a job for life, when the real reason why the concept of tenure has existed in universities since medieval times is that in order to advance ideas, promote innovation and protect against reprisals for proposing new approaches to scholarship, faculty need some sort of institutional protection. Think of it as a sort of “first amendment” right to those faculty members who, after years of demonstrated excellence in teaching, scholarship and service, and after a review process by their peers, are granted that protection.

That is why the consequences for Wisconsin and any other state that would adopt these policies can be very detrimental from many viewpoints. The reason why so many students from other countries choose to come to the U.S. for their studies is because we developed a system that offers a high quality, open and innovative education. If the above-referenced measures are established, states like Wisconsin will see a migration

of their best minds to other states, weakening their possibilities for increased economic development.

What has kept the U.S. a main force for innovation has been the ability to create an environment where challenging conventional wisdom is the norm, and that is just the first step towards advancement in any field.

This situation has also exposed the beliefs of administrators in public colleges and universities when it comes to defending values in the face of political winds. We have seen the president of the Louisiana State University system, F. King Alexander, holding a very public fight on behalf of university values and the funding to maintain them.

Alexander, testifying before the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee hearing, said that the budget cuts to higher education at the state level would mean states, “getting out of the higher education funding business. Colorado will become the first state not to spend a single penny on public higher education in 2025, and Louisiana will follow two years later,” Alexander said.

The problem is that if other political leaders see the proposed Wisconsin model as a blueprint to follow, public higher education in other states will spiral down with a negative cumulative effect on higher education in the U.S. as a whole.

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