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Faculty Speak Out

After faculty protested, the statewide board of trustees of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning dropped from its February agenda a discussion of language that would have changed tenure policy and due process protections in the state university system.

While there is no guarantee that the board will not reintroduce the idea, faculty should take heart at the evidence that concerted faculty action can be effective, says Garry Jennings, president of the Mississippi AAUP conference. The conference wrote to the state higher education commissioner protesting the proposed language, which would have significantly weakened due process for the state's faculty and allowed administrators to fire tenured, tenure-track, and contingent faculty more easily.

Higher education in Mississippi, as in many other states, is experiencing serious budget shortfalls, and governor Haley Barbour recently vetoed a bill that would reinstate funding for all levels of education in the state. But cuts and policy changes imposed from above are not the best or only way to address these. At Jennings' own institution, Delta State University, the administration has been working with the AAUP chapter and faculty senate to come up with alternatives to cutting faculty.

"This cooperation has come as the result of AAUP work in making good arguments and supporting faculty who have come forward to protest what they consider to be the dismantling of the curriculum," Jennings says. "The president of our university has, nonetheless, been happy to take our counsel and is very supportive of shared faculty governance. In this sense, our AAUP chapter couldn't be happier. But we still must work through the rest of the year to protect the faculty, the university, and to continue to serve the student. Although administrators at our institution have moved in our direction, they are still apprehensive in the face of faculty solidarity. It is a matter of working very hard every day to hold ground." (3/8/10)