January 28, 2011

Advocacy and Faculty Rights

Statement by AAUP President Cary Nelson

Update (2/1): Kristopher Petersen-Overton announced that he has been rehired. Cary Nelson called the rehiring "a victory for academic freedom and for the faculty."

The AAUP has reason to be concerned that Brooklyn College may have improperly cancelled Kristopher Petersen-Overton's contract to teach an M.A. seminar on Middle East Politics. The administration has asserted that Petersen-Overton is unqualified because he has not yet earned a PhD. Yet testimony from many at the college confirms that other doctoral students like Petersen-Overton, with a Master's degree, have regularly taught in the M.A. program without administration objection. His removal from the course followed rapidly upon a student's complaint that the course would not be "balanced" and a state assemblyman's attack on Petersen-Overton's scholarship. The AAUP does not require that courses be balanced, believing that exposure to advocacy can be a beneficial component of an education, so long as students are not expected to agree with an instructor's point of view. Moreover, the department's decision to hire him should have carried the day. The administration's intervention outside due process is a threat to academic freedom.

Speaking now--in what follows--for myself, rather than for the AAUP, I would add that Petersen-Overton's disputed essay "Inventing the Martyr," which discusses the role of sacrifice and martyrdom in the construction of Palestinian identity, is a serious and informative work of scholarly analysis. Given that myths of sacrifice are promoted by many nation states in crisis, readers may learn from the essay no matter what their stand on Middle East Politics may be.

--Cary Nelson, AAUP President