April 19, 2012

**Michigan’s Folly**

*AAUP president Cary Nelson issued the following statement on April 16, 2012:*

Should Michigan residents be concerned that the state’s legislators will enact legislation denying public university students their academic freedom? That’s exactly what will happen if the state’s higher education appropriations bill includes section 273a, which prohibits Michigan universities from having any working relationship with a potentially very broad range of civic, religious, and public advocacy groups in the state.

The issue is whether students can freely choose from among a wide variety of employers to gain work experience while in college, or whether the employers will have to pass a political litmus test. One thing is absolutely clear: hands-on work experience while in college is the single best way of finding out whether you want to make a given industry, business, or nonprofit agency your life’s work. No classroom, no matter how good, can replace actual workplace experience. That’s the single best way to learn what work you love and what work you do not enjoy.

I worked as an assistant teacher in a fifth grade class in Harlem while in college and learned that education is the best way to escape poverty and discrimination. That conviction has stayed with me for fifty years. I also worked in an office from 9 to 5 another semester and absolutely hated it.

While working at the National Institutes of Health in Maryland I advocated for federal prisoners there who were the subjects of medical experiments in the days before informed consent. The Michigan law would prohibit that. On another job I protested corporal punishment in New York schools. That too would have been unacceptable under the Michigan law.

Students need the freedom to choose the work experiences that best match their interests. Faculty members need the freedom to share their expertise with students when they advise them about possible work experiences. Universities need the freedom to set up work opportunities with all kinds of businesses and agencies—without political restrictions imposed by the state.

Section 273 should be soundly defeated.