July 1, 2013

AAUP Issues Statement on UC-Boulder Ideology Survey

Henry Reichman, chair of the AAUP’s Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure issued the following statement on July 1, 2013.

On June 20, the University of Colorado Board of Regents voted unanimously to conduct a survey to determine whether political or ideological discrimination exists on its Boulder campus. The survey, to be conducted this fall, will be designed to "establish a baseline on how well we respect diversity in all its forms."

While objective "campus-climate" surveys can sometimes be useful tools of university governance, it appears from news reports that the board’s motivation was not solely the search for greater knowledge. Regents Sue Sharkey and Jim Geddes, who sponsored the resolution along with a defeated companion resolution that would have banned discrimination based on political affiliation or philosophy, made clear that they believe the Boulder campus is inhospitable to conservatives and dominated by liberal orthodoxy.

Professor Paul Chinowsky, professor of engineering and incoming chair of the Boulder Faculty Assembly, questioned that assumption. “I’ve been here for twelve years and I don’t think the issue they’re bringing up is the problem they’re characterizing it to be,” he said. “And I don’t think the average faculty member thinks it is. . . . Is this a result of someone's agenda?” Descriptions of Boulder's large faculty body as sharing one belief system are "just plain wrong," he continued. "If you look across campus, it's actually a very diverse campus."

The Colorado board has a history of injecting political ideology into the academy. In March, the university announced that Steven Hayward would be its first visiting professor of conservative thought and policy, occupying a position funded by conservative donors. Limiting occupants of an academic position to those holding favored political positions is troubling, at the least. As AAUP president Rudy Fichtenbaum wrote of this and similar appointments, "Arrangements involving earmarked donations like these present a clear threat to academic freedom. Higher education should be a place where both students and teachers are free to investigate and to pursue various ideas. The academic freedom to pursue open inquiry lies at the center of the academic enterprise."

As the AAUP’s Statement on Professional Ethics makes clear, professors' "primary responsibility to their subject is to seek and to state the truth as they see it. . . . They accept the obligation to exercise critical self-discipline and judgment in using, extending, and transmitting knowledge.
They practice intellectual honesty." It is a violation of professional ethics for faculty members to impose their personal political or religious views on their students. However, the notion that somehow the political leanings of the faculty as a whole or of members of a single department, be they liberal or conservative, must inevitably result in such imposition is fundamentally flawed.

To date, charges that an alleged "liberal bias" among university faculty has chilled free inquiry and expression among either students or other faculty have not been supported by data. To be sure, in some disciplines in the humanities, for instance, most faculty may consider themselves moderate to liberal. But in other disciplines, for instance, business, economics, or engineering, faculty views tend to be much more conservative. Political litmus tests, whether utilized in individual hiring decisions or in assessments of entire faculties or campus climates, are clear violations of the principles of academic freedom.

It remains to be seen whether or not this survey will lead to the adoption of such a litmus test. We are encouraged by reports that faculty representatives will participate in the design and implementation of this survey. And we can only second the sentiments of Professor Chinowsky, who warned, “Let’s be very clear about what we’re going to do with the findings so that everyone is in agreement about what we’re trying to achieve,” he said. “Let’s prevent any misuse of data, or we’re going to create a very confrontational situation.” Indeed, there is a danger that the survey itself could have a chilling effect on the willingness of faculty to address controversial issues or voice opinions that might challenge the board’s sentiments.

We strongly urge the Colorado Regents to work with faculty representatives to ensure that this survey does not directly or indirectly threaten the academic freedom of faculty or introduce into faculty hiring or assessment inappropriate political criteria. We shall continue to monitor the situation.