The Senate, Academic Freedom, and the Importance of Governance

An Historical Overview

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One hundred years ago Professor Woodrow Wilson—former President of Princeton University and sitting Governor of New Jersey—was elected President of the United States. That same year, 1912, saw the establishment of the Faculty Senate at the University of Minnesota. These were related events. Wilson's election was the culmination of the Progressive era, a time in the history of our country when social and economic reforms together with political change sought to make our society more responsive to the will of the majority rather than the rule of a dominant economic and social elite. These same forces were also being felt on University campuses.

Authoritarian rule by powerful administrators or dictatorial trustees was the rule in most American universities. Efforts to change to a more democratic form of shared governance rocked such prestigious universities as the University of Chicago and Princeton University. Woodrow Wilson resigned as President of Princeton after he failed to curb the power of Deans and undergraduate drinking clubs supported by elitist Trustees as he attempted to introduce the concepts of shared governance. Around the country the Progressive impulse was felt in attempts by pioneering faculty to change the governance climate at their institutions. The American Association of University Professors was started in response to the firing of faculty for political reasons at Stanford University and the University of Chicago. Professor John Dewey, the Columbia University philosopher, proposed the collective bargaining model as he helped found the American Federation of Teachers. The major means of democratizing university governance, however, was through the creation of university senates around the country.

Minnesota particularly embraced the progressive impulse. Progressives controlled the dominant Republican Party. Minnesota voters, reluctant to vote for Democrats in 1912, could not vote for the conservative Taft, so its electoral votes went to the third-party Bull Moose candidate, Theodore Roosevelt. This same spirit of reform and democratization motivated the establishment of the Senate as the institutional means for achieving the goal of shared governance and faculty control of the curriculum. Implicit in the formation of the University Senate was the idea that academic freedom, freedom of inquiry, should be the norm at the University of Minnesota. Protection of that right through gaining faculty tenure was not to come for another quarter century.

We are now commemorating the centennial of the Faculty Senate, which over the years evolved into the University Senate with the participation of students and staff who together with the faculty engage in the joint endeavor of governance. In celebrating a century of Senate existence we should evaluate the impact it had on the University and how successful it has been in preserving and defending academic freedom and responsibility and in fulfilling its stated mission of shared governance.

The record of the Senate is mixed. For the first half century it did not fully protect the interests of faculty governance and academic freedom. During the second half century its record was much better.

Five years into its life, the Senate faced its first challenge, which it failed. In April 1917, after the United States declared war on Germany, the Minnesota State legislature turned over dictatorial power
to a five-member Public Safety Commission that initiated a veritable intellectual reign of terror on all who were perceived to be weak supporters of the war. The chair of the University's Regents, Fred Snyder, also acted as chair of the Hennepin County Public Safety Commission. The Commission's war on Germans and its nativist efforts at controlling the use of foreign languages was reflected in attempts to curtail the intellectual activities of the German department. More seriously, under pressure of the Public Safety commission, Regent Snyder convinced the Board of Regents to fire Political Science Professor William Schaper because of his opposition to the war. Pressure was also applied to others who were not enthusiastic supporters of the war or who criticized the way the war was funded. Supporters of the Non Partisan League and defenders of the right of free expression within the faculty were forced to conform or be fired. Professor West of the History department ceased all political activities. The Senate was mute. It did not come to the defense of Professor Schaper, probably because most faculty Senators agreed with the actions of the Public Safety Commission.

From 1934 until 1942, Dean of Students Edward Nicholson kept an army of spies and informants invading the sanctity of the lecture hall and classroom looking for Jewish radicals and agitators, and sending his findings to a network of outside “patriots” seeking to undermine Minnesota's Farmer Labor administrations and the national New Deal. During this period the University applied student admission quotas as a means of limiting the enrollment of undesirable elements, Jews, or other new immigrants. Despite the fact that the Senate during this period embraced the principle of academic tenure adopted by the Regents, it remained mute to the actions of Dean Nicholson, perhaps because members by and large agreed with these actions.

Finally, the most egregious failure of the Senate occurred during the height of the Cold-War-induced hysteria that dominated the political culture of our society and thus the actions of the University during the decade from 1948 until 1958. Unlike many other states, Minnesota did not impose loyalty oaths upon its faculty, but nonetheless demanded political conformity. It required faculty members to cooperate with congressional or legislative committees looking into questionable political affiliations, or risk dismissal. A few faculty physicists, including Frank Oppenheimer, were forced to resign, and philosopher Francis Wiggins’s appointment was not renewed. Again the Senate was silent.

The second half-century of the Senate's existence was quite different. It served with creativity and distinction the role of defender of academic freedom and responsibility as well as the right of faculty tenure. It furthered the objective of shared governance despite obstacles, and sought to spread that idea to our sister colleges and universities in Minnesota.

Just as the second half-century opened, President O. Meredith Wilson signaled that a new era had begun at the University. Professor Mulford Sibley, a controversial political scientist, raised the ire of local politicians by advocating greater student activism through formation of clubs supporting free love, communism, and other hitherto taboo activities. When some Regents inquired as to how to fire Professor Sibley, President Wilson responded that they would have to fire him—Wilson—first.

There were many subsequent actions of the Senate that reinforced President Wilson's statement. Through the initiative of the Senate's Student Affairs Committee, the Senate abolished the long-standing doctrine of “in loco parentis” and freed students from restrictive behavioral regulations. The Senate recognized the rights of students and subsequently admitted the Student Senate as full and equal members of the University Senate.

Early in 1969 a group of African-American students occupied Morrill Hall demanding the immediate establishment of a Black Studies department. Faculty committees had been working to create such
programs, but to the students the pace was too slow. After all-night negotiations an agreement was reached hastening the creation of a program in African American Studies. The subsequent emergency Senate meeting approved the agreement after vigorous and heated debate. This enabled the University to expand its curriculum to open such new interdisciplinary programs as Urban Studies, Women's Studies, Chicano Studies, and Indian Studies. We were able to accomplish this curricular expansion without the conflict and chaos other Universities experienced over the same issue at that time.

The explosion of student activism triggered by opposition to the Viet Nam war and the simultaneous youth rebellion and counter-culture movement threatened the stability and educational viability of the University. Many universities exploded in violence, but the actions of our Senate and faculty prevented disruptive confrontation, save for one instance when an uncooperative Minneapolis mayor called the police into a confrontation with students blocking the streets. The Senate, through the Twin Cities Campus Assembly, successfully channeled the widespread resentment into creative activities by organizing informative teach-ins and stimulating short-course alternatives to the threatened closing of the University. The crisis was met without depriving any members of the University community of their academic freedom or civil rights and with minimal disruption of our normal scholarly functions.

In an effort to solve a soft-money crisis in the Medical School, some administrators and a few Regents attempted to change the tenure rules. This provoked the most serious challenge ever faced by the Senate. During the 1990s the Tenure War dominated the debate at the University, and the Senate fought diligently to preserve the institution of tenure as a protection for academic freedom. A small group of University leaders, dubbed The Gang of 19, led the fight enlisting public support and threatening to move to a collective bargaining model rather than the shared governance model. The tenure battle received national attention and was closely followed by our colleagues throughout the land. The faculty, through the Senate, won this war when the leading Regent proponent of tenure elimination resigned and the tenure code itself was revised to ensure regular peer review. The Senate did itself proud during the tenure battle and had the full support of the Student Senate as well as the staff.

During the past half century, the Senate has worked well as a creative institution both to further academic freedom and responsibility and to protect tenure as well as functioning in the day-to-day gritty work of shared University governance. The details of that work must still be made known to most of our colleagues and to the public at large.

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