

Faculty Leader Defends Reading Assignment

Academic freedom came under fire on several campuses last summer, including the University of California, Berkeley; Central Connecticut State University; Colorado College; and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The November-December issue of *Academe* carried statements by the presidents of these institutions, who defended academic freedom amid worries about national security that followed the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States.

Following is an excerpt from a statement by a faculty leader: Richard Veit, chair of the University of North Carolina's Faculty Assembly. In an August 22 address to the Educational Planning, Policies, and Programs Committee of UNC's board of governors, Veit responded to the controversy that erupted when the university's Chapel Hill campus asked incoming students to read *Approaching the Qur'an* by Michael Sells as part of a summer reading program designed to encourage students to discuss different points of view.

Subsequent to Veit's address, the Educational Planning, Policies, and Programs Committee unanimously passed a resolution affirming academic freedom, efforts to block the assignment through the courts failed, and students met to discuss the reading. Veit alludes in his statement to a rider that was added to an early version of the North Carolina state budget bill denying state funds for "any course or summer reading program in any religion unless all other known religions are offered in an equal or incremental way." The rider was not, however, included in the final bill.

As faculty assembly chair, I attend meetings of the board and of this committee, where we frequently hear about the billions of dollars that the university adds to our state's economy. We hear reports on the university's role in preparing the state's pharmacists, nurses, engineers, and accountants. These are all matters of great pride and importance—but they do not define the essential purpose of the university—or, I am certain, would many faculty have chosen an academic career if economic stimulus and job training were our principal business—nor, I think, would members of this board give so many hours of their time in selfless dedication to this institution if you did not believe in a nobler purpose. It is at times like this that we must give thought to our core principles and values.

We must remind ourselves that a university is, by definition, a place where the universe of ideas is open to examination and debate. The fundamental mission of a university is the search for truth and understanding. Its most basic premise is that truth can be achieved—and can only be achieved—when all ideas are open to thoughtful, unfettered examination. All university faculty and students must be free to consider all ideas whatsoever—old ideas, new ideas, accepted ideas, radical ideas, popular ideas, despised ideas—without restriction or limitation imposed by political or religious orthodoxy. This principle has always been true, and it remains true today. It is the essence of academic freedom. Without this freedom, a university cannot exist.

Inseparable from the search for truth is the search for understanding. It is the obligation of scholars—faculty and students—to examine the world as it is, in all its aspects. In a diverse, complex, dangerous, and increasingly interconnected world, we must gain the fullest possible understanding of others and of ourselves.

As faculty we have the obligation to teach students—not to indoctrinate them, not to provide them with a store of facts—but to expose students to diverse thought, to teach them to analyze, compare, and evaluate ideas. In short, we must train students to think for themselves.

It was in the spirit of open inquiry and the quest for understanding that the faculty at Chapel Hill assigned the reading and discussion of a scholarly book, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*. If legislators impose what would be, in effect, a ban on the study of a particular book, they would limit academic freedom in a way no different or less destructive than the shackles placed on academic inquiry by the Taliban in pre-September 11 Afghanistan.

Academic freedom entails that academic and curricular decisions in a university must be made, through orderly academic processes, by the faculty. When the faculty's considered professional judgments are limited or overturned by others, academic freedom ceases to exist, and the university ceases to function as a university.

Academic freedom is a powerful idea, but it is constantly under attack, and it exists only when it is vigilantly and vigorously defended. As faculty, we urge the North Carolina General Assembly to reject the proposal in the house budget that would curtail academic inquiry. . . . The faculty are also looking to the members of this committee and all members of the university's governing board to support us through your individual statements, and to make it clear to all that you strenuously oppose every attempt to limit academic freedom.