

President Richards Comments – February 24, 2021

Our public universities are points of huge pride for our state. They are among the best in the nation. As members of the Board of Regents our charge is to do everything we can to allow the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, and the University of Northern Iowa to continue their excellence in the areas of education, research and public service.

There are two areas that I wish to address today, free speech on campus, and tenure of our faculty.

The Board will not tolerate the violation of anyone's free speech on our campuses. This constitutional right must be sacred on our campuses. The Board of Regents and our universities absolutely support free speech and open dialogue on our campuses.

Every faculty, staff and student must feel confident that their constitutional rights are protected on our campuses, and that they will not face retribution for exercising their rights.

We must also be honest and recognize that there have been times when this expectation has not been met. In these cases, we have and will continue to act quickly to recognize what has occurred, take corrective action, and educate those involved.

The recommendations brought forth by the Free Speech committee will deal with free speech in the classroom, preventing punishment for expressing a certain viewpoint, and annual training for all faculty staff and students on free speech. In particular, we will be creating a permanent free speech committee of the Board where complaints about the infringement of free speech from faculty staff and students can be submitted and reviewed by the Board.

Everyone has the right to express their own opinion. Disagreeing on issues and having a respectful debate about those issues should happen on our university campuses. What should not happen is preventing another person or group's opinion from being expressed or threatening those opinions with possible repercussions. This is not who we are, and it is not right.

There has been a lot of focus on tenure lately.

The tenure system allows universities to employ faculty who create new knowledge through their scholarship, share that knowledge with students in the classroom, and apply it in ways that benefit our state and society. Tenure enables faculty to explore all avenues of their discipline without administrative interference or political influence, in order to follow the data, facts and evidence.

Tenure is not granted to all faculty, and to receive it one must go through a rigorous multi-year process. It is not a “job for life,” as all faculty, including tenured faculty, are evaluated annually. Poor performance, violations of policy, and other misconduct could be grounds for discipline up to and including termination.

Tenure allows our institutions to recruit and retain the best faculty to teach, do research, and provide service to advance their institutional missions. The Board fully supports tenure at Iowa’s Regent universities.

Education. Research. Public Service. These are the pillars on which the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, and the University of Northern Iowa are built. The protection of free speech and tenure are critical components of these pillars.

This Board is fully committed to doing all it can to ensure to the protection of free expression on our campuses, and the continuation of the tenure system. These two core components of higher education must be safeguarded and strengthened, and we are committed to this process. By doing this, Iowa’s Regent Universities will continue to be among the best public universities in the nation.