

Professors Grade Gartner's Analysis

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A reply to former regent Gartner from the ISU AAUP Executive Board

In his July 17 commentary, former regent Michael Gartner makes a number of statements regarding the Iowa Board of Regents institutions. We would like to offer a response.

Shared Governance

Even though teaching, research and extension programs that are the heart of the university would not exist without the expertise and hard work of faculty, it seems that every discussion of problems at the regents institutions begins with proposals to make working conditions worse for faculty and to make it harder for the institutions to attract and retain talented young faculty. Gartner's statement that shared governance should be discarded indicates a lack of understanding of what this means.

Shared governance is an acknowledgement that faculty are not simply employees, but have significant responsibility for managing essential university functions. Teaching, research and extension programs are created by faculty and to a considerable extent managed and supervised by faculty. The work of creating, evaluating and approving courses and majors is done by faculty working through faculty curriculum committees. Only faculty have the professional expertise to do this. What is often not understood is the large amount of time faculty spend outside of their own teaching and research working on university business.

AAUP has worked for 100 years in support of a strong tenure system as a protector of academic freedom. Our society benefits greatly from having faculty free to pursue research and teaching without threat of reprisal from powerful special interests.

Eliminating tenure would leave faculty vulnerable. Do the people of Iowa really want universities that teach only what the current party in power in Des Moines wants them to teach, or universities that do only research that the party in power deems appropriate? As a practical matter, if the regents universities unilaterally eliminate tenure they would

be giving themselves an enormous handicap in the competition for top talent. Why would a top young faculty member take a job at an Iowa institution that does not grant tenure when he or she could take a job at one that does?

The system of shared governance with a strong tenure system to protect academic freedom has helped make the U.S. university system the envy of the world.

Administrators

Gartner seems especially concerned that faculty on search committees will choose “academics” as university presidents. Consider the current presidents of the regents institutions. Greg Geoffroy, Ben Allen and Sally Mason are all “academics” who were successful faculty members, successful department chairs, successful deans, and successful provosts before becoming presidents. Rather than being naïve and inexperienced, all three are accomplished administrators with many years of experience.

Search committees and open searches are important manifestations of a key university belief that all individuals are judged by merit and earn success through their efforts. Faculty and administrators are hired in open searches run by broadly representative search committees as a way of ensuring that the best candidate is hired from a large pool of applicants. President Geoffroy earned his position by being the best candidate, and the open nature of the search gives him legitimacy.

Workload

Gartner suggests faculty teaching loads should be increased and comments on the classroom contact hours, apparently to suggest that faculty are not working very hard. He should know better. The Board of Regents has taken numerous surveys that show faculty typically work an average of between 50 and 60 hours per week. Their time is divided between teaching, research and service. All three are essential activities. If more time is to be spent on teaching, then what other activities should be cut back? Should the faculty do less research? At ISU research brought in more than \$342 million last year and at the University of Iowa more than \$456 million, much more than either tuition or state appropriations. How much of that funding does Gartner want these universities to give up?

In addition, research advances knowledge to the benefit of Iowa and society at large. University research benefits businesses, especially small businesses that use university faculty research to solve their problems. Who would Gartner rather have teaching the children of Iowa: faculty who read textbooks or faculty who write textbooks, faculty who read about advances in their field or faculty who make advances in their field?

Politicization

The danger of allowing politicians to make decisions at the institutions has long been known, but the answer is not for the regents and top administrators to run the institutions by top-down dictates. A key purpose of the regents system is to protect the faculty from political pressure that would compromise their ability to do unbiased research and teaching. This destruction could also be accomplished by micromanaging regents or by a politically appointed president of the Board of Regents. The current system has several layers of protection to prevent that from happening.