

Writing Your Newspapers About Academic Issues

By **John K. Wilson**

Academia is one of the most misunderstood institutions in society. Whether it's tenure or academic freedom, the general public (and even many journalists) have a distorted view of what academics do. That's why it's very important to educate the public. One of the most important mechanisms for doing this is a letter to the editor. Here's some advice:

- 1) Be quick: respond the same day that an article is published, or no later than the next day. Always email letters (most newspapers provide an email address on their opinion pages or website).
- 2) Be polite: don't insult anyone; adopt a calm, rational persona.
- 3) Be non-academic: avoid the big words and jargon.
- 4) Be concise: follow the word limit rules for your newspaper strictly. If you want to write a longer article, propose an op-ed to the opinion editor.
- 5) Be accurate: get your facts straight, and be very careful when you claim that someone is wrong.
- 6) Be yourself: avoid quotations or citations, just give your perspective. Don't be afraid to include your professional affiliation (along with your name, address, town, and phone number), since it can add to your credibility.

Below are some examples of letters I published earlier this year in response to academic freedom issues.

To the *Chicago Sun-Times*:

Andrew Greeley (column, Feb. 18) argues that academic freedom should "protect students from yahoo professors" such as Ward Churchill. But who gets to define what a "yahoo" professor is? By this vague standard, perhaps Greeley himself could be fired by an ignorant administrator. Greeley contends that "class is not for personal opinion" and ideally he may be correct, but who can we trust to distinguish between honest presentation of subject matter and a personal opinion? To fire professors who seek to challenge the convictions of their students, as Greeley urges, is to invite a resurgence of McCarthyism in America. Will students really be better off when professors are terrified of speaking honestly?

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To the *Bloomington Pantagraph*:

Thomas Sowell's attack on academic freedom (column, Feb. 16) is so full of mistakes that his factual errors almost obscure the larger flaws of his opposition to freedom of expression on college campuses. For example, Sowell falsely claims that professors control college investments and ban students from fraternities and Reserve Officers Training Corps. Trustees, not professors, determine investment policies. No college has ever prevented a student from joining a fraternity or ROTC. Shared governance, tenure, and academic freedom have helped to make American higher education the finest and freest in the world despite ongoing cutbacks in government funding.

Sowell argues that a professor should be fired for spending 10 seconds in a class talking about the war in Iraq or homelessness. Would he also fire a professor for telling a joke, discussing the weather, or starting class 10 seconds late? Would Sowell ban professors from ever expressing an idea that someone, somewhere, finds offensive? Imagine what our newspapers would look like if this standard was applied to them; they certainly wouldn't ever include Sowell's writings.

As a student, it angers me when censors like Sowell seek to silence my professors, and me. A college is not a job training course. Professors should expose students to controversial ideas beyond the narrow scope of a particular class. There is nothing wrong with a professor expressing an opinion. Students are not infantile idiots who must be protected from ideas Thomas Sowell doesn't like. We can think for ourselves.

Sowell contends that we need to abolish academic freedom in order to fire professors who might write or say something offensive. But a professor like Ward Churchill can be dealt with in a simple way: ignore him, or argue with him if you like. To demand the censorship of all 1.1 million faculty in America because one of them might say something you don't like is dangerous. It endangers the freedom of professors to speak their minds. It endangers the freedom of students to hear controversial ideas. And Sowell's attack on academic freedom endangers everyone's freedom to dissent.

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