

Faculty Line - Reaffirming our Commitment to Academic Freedom

February 10, 2017

SOC 2000 is a Wright Core course providing an “introduction to the processes through which individuals become members of groups, organizations, institutions, and societies, and how human social interactions lead to changes in social life and structures.” The course satisfies part of the university’s Multicultural Competency (MC) requirement in the Core. MC courses exist to ensure our graduates develop “the skills to be able to engage in an informed way with diverse peoples, cultures, and histories. Developing such skills requires exposure to, knowledge of, and appreciation for cultural, economic, social, political and racial diversities within the United States and throughout the world.”

Recently in some sections of this course, class discussion turned toward the Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, dated January 27, 2017, in relation to the day’s course content and textbook reading. During the discussion, the instructor, an international member of the Faculty and naturalized citizen of the U.S., shared her experience as an emigrant and her personal and professional view as a sociologist of the impact of the executive order—a very relevant contemporary example of “the processes through which individuals become members of groups” and certainly one that has been much discussed among many groups, organizations, institutions, and societies in the days since January 27. Subsequently the instructor received at least one anonymous “friendly reminder” that the sender would pursue any legal means necessary to have her fired if she continued to teach on such topics, which the sender characterized as “hating America.”

The faculty member has been around long enough to know that threats of this nature are, while not common, to be expected occasionally and usually empty. They frequently cluster around courses whose curricular and programmatic purpose is to open students to alternative viewpoints and to challenge them to think critically about received notions. The faculty member and I both have confidence in Wright State’s upper administration, deans, and chairs to support faculty and to defuse and redirect attempts to curtail faculty or mischaracterize their teaching. And the faculty member (and I) remain confident that, should these administrators not do so, the faculty’s rights would be vigorously defended by AAUP-WSU.

Nonetheless, to one not American-born, being accused of teaching hatred of America, even by one disgruntled student or parent, has, in the era of the referenced executive order, a chilling effect. And while Liberal Arts faculty are not the only ones who teach courses whose subject matter and curricular purpose put them at risk of such accusations, theirs are the disciplines that are most often singled out by forces hostile to higher education—another chilling effect.

So why am I drawing your attention to the possibly trivial incident of an anonymous, likely empty, email threat? In conversation with this colleague about the classroom experience and her own journey from a totalitarian nation to the relative freedom and opportunity of the United States; and in light of the very well-attended panel discussion “President Trump’s Executive Order on Immigration and Refugees” sponsored by the Departments of History, Political Science, and Religion and the University Center for International Education on February 2; *and* in preparation for what may be the dawn of an empowered political culture that does not embrace some core values of American public and higher education, it

seemed to me a good time to use the bully pulpit of the Faculty Line to encourage the Faculty as a body to reflect upon and reaffirm our commitment to Academic freedom.

Academic freedom holds so high a place among our principles and values at Wright State that it sits near the top of our policies website (policy.wright.edu) as [Policy 1220 Academic Freedom and Professional Responsibilities](#). This particular policy lives under the executive responsibility of the Faculty Senate. In reaffirming the policy in 2015 the Faculty said as one that “the freedom to teach, both in and outside the classroom; to conduct research and to publish, display or perform the results of those investigations; and to address any matter of institutional policy or action whether or not as a member of an agency of institutional governance” is the “unqualified right of every faculty member whether or not that person possesses tenure.” Academic freedom undergirds all that we do. By sharing our stories and supporting one another in our pursuit of truth, we affirm our commitment to the responsible and necessary use of that freedom.

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