

When AAUP Principles Collide

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Of all the major AAUP principles – academic freedom, tenure, due process, and shared governance – I often wonder which one is the most important. We may argue that all of them are interconnected in some way or another and therefore they are all important. But what if one principle appears to be in conflict with another? How can we make a judgment call in such a situation? This hypothetical question was realized in the recent developments at DePaul University when the Board of Trustees voted to close down its Barat campus.

The university promised to honor the tenure standards of its Barat campus tenured faculty and help as much as possible those who were on tenure track. This challenge was passed on to the various departments at the DePaul main campus, which were now placed in the difficult situation of “honoring tenure” by accepting tenured Barat faculty amongst them as colleagues.

Faculty in those departments wanted to have a say as to who their colleagues would be and insisted on “admission criteria,” including interviews, before accepting anyone from Barat College – even if they had already earned tenure there. Such an expectation reflects an important AAUP principle: faculty must set the standards and methods of hiring their new colleagues. On the other hand, Barat tenured faculty felt betrayed that their tenure, earned through a legitimate process at Barat, was now coming under question by colleagues in the same institution.

It is my understanding that some of the Barat tenured faculty made a smooth transition into the main campus departments and others, for a variety of reasons, decided to take an early retirement. A few tenured Barat faculty who were not hired in specific departments were to be housed under the Vice President’s office in some strange capacity still unclear to me and most certainly unorthodox in practice.

I wonder if this difficult dilemma would have arisen if shared governance were fully applied in this entire story. When DePaul was about to purchase Barat College, the Faculty Senate voted against the idea. Yet the Board of Trustees ignored the faculty’s concerns and went ahead with the purchase. Despite major restructuring and the launching of a more focused marketing for new students, Barat College was hit with major repair costs that undermined its financial health. The Board was contemplating closing it down, thereby cutting their financial losses.

The Faculty Senate of DePaul (which included elected representatives from Barat College) met to discuss the pros and cons of closure. After a long meeting and after hearing from administrators, faculty and students at Barat and AAUP representatives, the Senate voted in favor of continuing the operation of this 100-year-old historic institution. Although the vote was close, it was nevertheless a Yes vote in favor of preserving Barat.

Once again, and for the second time, the Board of Trustees did not concur with the Faculty Senate vote and decided instead to close down the Barat College campus.

I do not propose that the Board of Trustees was wrong in its decisions. All I am suggesting is that the system of shared governance failed DePaul University by not including faculty input in the early deliberations, when contemplating the purchase of Barat College. As a result, faculty were faced with difficult decisions in dealing with the aftermath of the Barat closure. This is how two fundamental AAUP principles came to collide. The big lesson from this sad story is this: institutions that plan to merge or pursue the acquisition or integration of another college must fully engage the faculty from the initial stages of the process. Academic careers and principles are at stake and the Trustees must be prudent to consider such faculty participation as vital to the smooth operation of the institution and the morale of the college community. Faculty concerns are just as important to consider as the financial ramifications associated with a merger or acquisition.

As we witnessed in the case at Barat College, sometimes these acquisitions do not work. Safety nets that protect the faculty must be set in place before the acquisition is made. Think of it as a prenuptial agreement arranged prior to academic mergers, designed to protect faculty rights and AAUP principles, regardless of the outcome of the merger. It is extremely important that such mergers involve the faculty from the onset if we are to avoid future situations where AAUP principles collide, and faculty morale is injured.