

Acceptance Remarks for AAUP Alexander Meikeljohn Award
President Patricia McGuire
Trinity Washington University
June 12, 2010

Thank you, Professor David Rabban and the members of Committee A for this marvelous award, and that awesome citation, and special thanks as well to Gary Rhoades and Martin Snyder.

Even after all these years in the presidency, I still have the capacity to be surprised in delightful ways by the kindness of colleagues. And, every so often, the shock of humility arrests me in the face of so many still-daunting challenges.

When Mary Burgan called to tell me of this award, I was surprised to think that what I've had to say was even noticed by AAUP, let alone worthy of such a great honor. I am delighted and deeply grateful that my faculty colleague, Dr. Minerva San Juan, submitted the nomination, and I am also so grateful to Dr. Burgan for her wonderful support. My gratitude to AAUP is profound; I treasure this recognition for saying things that I absolutely believe.

I am also deeply grateful that you recognize Trinity through this award. I would not be able to do my work as I do it, including speaking out when I feel I must, without the profoundly important sense of mission that we share among the community at Trinity — faculty and staff, students and alumnae, trustees and benefactors. A Benedictine abbot once gave a homily at Trinity in which he said that the Sisters of Notre Dame who founded Trinity were dangerous women who created a dangerous place — a place that led women to believe that they could do absolutely anything; that, in fact, women could change the world. Trinity is still that very dangerous place, inciting new generations of students who need us now, more than ever, to achieve that radical sense of empowerment through education that is the best hope for improving the conditions of their children, families and communities.

Along with the deep gratitude I feel in receiving this award, the shock of humility does arrest me when I think of the increasingly pernicious threats to academic freedom and the entire purpose of higher education. I say "humility" because no one of us alone — no matter how blithe we may appear to be in mounting our defenses of the academy — can long withstand the pressure to concede silence without great colleagues supporting us, goading us and even insisting that we mount the barricades together once more. That's why this Alexander Meiklejohn Award is so important, and I hope AAUP will find occasion to give it more often, because we presidents and our boards sometimes need others to strengthen our spines against the pressures to go along or be quiet.

I mentioned the threats to academic freedom. Among many, let me mention just three briefly:

First, the threat that comes with the devolution of higher education's purpose from the discovery of knowledge and cultivation of intellect to the mundane tasks of job training, simply producing workers for the economic engines of society. Yes, ensuring that our graduates can have productive, fulfilling work is important, but that is a happy by-product of the academy, not its central mission. This tension has been growing for years, leaching our purpose slowly under the surface, subtly draining out the urgency of our defense of academic freedom under the guise of satisfying the corporate sector's demand for more accountants, computer scientists, editors, nurses, and pharmacologists — as if the professional workforce needed nothing more out of higher education than the technical knowledge and skills to do their jobs very well. Such a soulless purpose treats our graduates as mere instruments of the economy, as if all those well educated workers have no souls to sing with a Shakespearean sonnet; no intellects to ponder the unfathomable evil that tortures human existence; no eyes to drown in the beauty of Renoir; no ears through which the strains of Chopin can reach their innermost being; no unrequited impulses to ditch the calculator for scuba tanks to plumb the depths; no burning itch to pen the great American novel; no curiosity to re-read Nietzsche just in case advancing age might make clearer what a nineteen-year-old brain could not comprehend.

Resisting the devolution of higher education into an overgrown secondary school model links to the second threat: the increasingly prevalent bureaucratic interference in our internal affairs (and private organizations can be just as nefarious as governments on this score), a tendency that is exacerbated in a climate that treats higher education as simply an extension of K-12 education, or, for us Catholic universities and colleges, the parish grade school. If we think that what happened to the Texas social studies curriculum could never happen to the collegiate curriculum, we are alarmingly obtuse.

Higher education is one of the great counterbalances to government in a free society, but that balance only works through the free and frequent exercise of the muscle of our mission. We are the stewards of democracy's brain, the guarantors of informed citizen voices, the producers of much of the knowledge that fuels innovation stimulating social and economic progress. Lilliputian bureaucracies will certainly always try to tie down our free sails as we venture into uncharted waters — whether condemning a speaker or forbidding a play or investigating a scholar. Our stewardship — as presidents, as faculty, as trustees, all stewards of the freedom of higher education to do its work uninhibited and unintimidated — our stewardship requires us to swing mighty axes against the restraints that compromise our ability to conduct research freely, publish whatever we choose, teach as we must, and speak openly without fear.

Which leads to my last point: the biggest threat to our academic freedom and health of our enterprise is our own tendency to self-censorship, especially among college presidents and trustees, on matters where we must be loud and unafraid. Attorneys General may rattle their swords, bishops may fulminate, opinion writers may harrumph about the faculty member whose views of reality may be no weirder than their own. Look out the window: out there, every day, all of that is going on. We presidents can either cower under our desks to escape the noise, hoping no one calls us out, resolving to remain silent lest we lose a donor or upset the

alumni or incur the wrath of some self-appointed watchdog of orthodoxy blogging away in his basement (in his pajamas). Or, we can do our jobs, with responsibility, with integrity and with *audacity*.

My most important obligation as a university president is *not* to raise money (a popular view of the presidency that is part of that devolution of purpose I mentioned earlier), but rather, to protect the climate for academic freedom on campus because that climate is the lungs, the oxygen, the nourishment that is essential for the life of the university to flourish.

Academic freedom rarely dies in one egregious event; academic freedom erodes in a thousand small concessions. We can see what Attorney General Cuccinelli is doing, and we can call him out. We know what the Cardinal Newman Society is up to, most of the time, and we can go about our business knowing full well that some of us will be featured on their blogs (and not in a good way!). We can accept that a bishop will have a different point of view on some matters and we can discuss that with him without retreating from the principled pursuit of unfettered learning, discourse, and scholarship on our Catholic campuses. We can see what Congress and the Department of Education are doing to use accreditation to reach long arms into our curricula and we can testify about better solutions for more accountability while protecting our autonomy.

We can do all of that in the public eye with confidence that we are pursuing our purpose in higher education with integrity.

But we lose everything when we refuse the engagement, when we sit back and hope that this wave will just pass over us, naively thinking that our freedom will remain intact even as the ebb tide washes it away.

Thank you, AAUP, not only for recognizing what I have said in the past, but more importantly, for strengthening my resolve to keep swimming against that tide on all of the days still to come.