

Speaking Out as an Untenured Professor

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Dear Fellow Untenured Professors:

I have been teaching for 20 years, and after a range of adjunct and visiting gigs and two tenure-track jobs (one of which ended because the institution was on the verge of financially collapsing after the economic crash in 2008), I am up for tenure and promotion this year. As virtually every tenure-track professor experiences, I, too, have had to make choices about when, where, how and why to speak out and about what, and have had to weigh issues of silence and voice against the hope and need for job security, health insurance, retirement benefits and the like.

I have had to decide what is worth it and what is not when I have been on the brink of making my viewpoints clear to the campus community and the larger community.

Being untenured is the ultimate manifestation of “You just have to know how and when to pick your battles.” If President Trump could have been an adjunct or tenure-track professor first, perhaps he would be less impulsive and reactive, thinking before tweeting, speaking, banning and dictating.

Over breakfast recently, I told my partner, Mike, that I am glad that I am not in my first few years on the tenure track at this juncture in American history -- it would feel too stifling and too frustrating to teach and write. That would be especially the case in the fields I am in: sociology and gender studies, where I teach about violence against women, race relations, white privilege, poverty and LGBTQ issues. And then I looked at him and said, “There’s so much I would love to share with newer faculty members to help them.”

So what follows are some ideas to help untenured faculty concerned about academic freedom in the current, politically charged environment.

Create a policy on your syllabus and reiterate in person that no one is allowed to record classes under any circumstances. I have had this policy for years because I teach about sensitive subjects and students often share experiences in ways that make them vulnerable. I believe that other students should not be allowed to have recordings of that. Students might talk about their parents in prison or their experiences of sexual assault, addiction, mental illness or HIV status, and other students should simply listen and take it in but not be able to record it. Making a recording undermines the classroom environment as an open, comfortable, contained, welcoming and sacred space for real and spirited dialogue.

Speak out when your knowledge base and your own experiences buttress and substantiate your points. For example, science professors should feel free to talk about climate change and global warming. Political science and history professors should point out parallels to events of the past when it is pertinent. Policy professors should speak out about the implications of policies as related to such things as immigration and reproductive rights. Art professors should speak out about issues of funding for the arts. And so on.

Find mentors and role models at your college or university, as well as at other institutions, who best demonstrate how you can be outspoken but also feel protected. Attend faculty meetings regularly and observe whether faculty governance operates strongly or not. Hear what is being discussed and who is raising challenging issues and topics. Observe how they are received, and identify who has institutional power and uses their voice for the public good. Study how they are most effective in getting their views across.

Get to know the administration and have and build good faith. Get to know your provost, vice president for academic affairs, chancellor, president and other senior administrators, and have them get to know you and your ideas. For example, in my first tenure-track job at a Catholic college, I had to sign a contract about how I would use my office computer and that I would not use it to go on pornographic websites. At the same time, I was planning to

talk about pornography, sexuality and violence in classes and wanted to be sure that my department chair and the vice president for academic affairs understood the context of that and supported me. I will never forget the incredibly generous response of the vice president for academic affairs and how clear her support was. She said, “We hired you here because of your strong record teaching about these difficult issues. Do not change and please continue to teach our students the same way here.”

At my current institution, I also ran into complicated, dicey issues three years ago related to teaching about violence against women. I approached our former executive vice chancellor for academic affairs, a man who, as a colleague described it, is “academic freedom personified.” Without hesitation, he expressed only trust in me.

Find and cultivate your voice. The purpose of college is to help students of all political affiliations and beliefs cultivate their sense of voice and strengthen it so they can support their points, using the class materials to do so. For example, quoting the Bible would be insufficient in a paper that has nothing to do with a religion class. As professors, we can model for students how to build and support an argument, and how to use our voices to speak out against injustices.

I was recently involved in hosting an evening event where a speaker presented on fantasy football and gender issues. During the Q&A session that followed, one of the male students remarked, “Why do y’all care so much about this? You girls and women can do anything that you put your minds to, and you should know that by now.”

I responded by saying that Nov. 8 showed us the opposite: that the most experienced, knowledgeable candidate -- who was the woman -- still could not make it, even after dotting all her i’s and crossing all her t’s for decades. If Trump, with his dearth of political experience and knowledge and his temperament, had been a woman, there is absolutely no way he would have won. And if Clinton had been a man, she probably would have.

Being a sociologist, and specifically an expert on gender and feminism, made it possible for me to speak out with a strong sense of voice and act as a role model for other attendees, including students and other faculty members, who were more reticent to speak up about gender inequality and gendered processes. While the student’s comment was well intended for trying to express to women that they can do anything they put their minds to, my sociological perspective enabled me to show the group that there are indeed entrenched gendered dynamics and forces at play that constrain individuals’ choices and actions, and that the recent election is a microcosm of that.

Assume that everything you say and do in the classroom could show up on social media. It is also a good idea to be mindful of your online presence and to consider how and what you post on Twitter, Facebook and other social media and to re-evaluate your privacy settings. You might consider any quotations you embed with your email signature, how you use your institution’s email account and how you decorate your office and your door. You might be pleasantly surprised by supportive colleagues who are receptive to your self-expression, but it is a good idea to first gauge others’ reactions and perceptions.

If you sense a problem brewing, deal with it before it takes on a life of its own. Most department chairs will appreciate the heads-up and the opportunity to strategize proactively with you. If things escalate for any reason and the news media starts calling you, remember that you are under no obligation to speak with them. It will serve you well, in any case, to get acquainted with staff members who work in media relations at your institution and to familiarize them with your areas of expertise. They are often good allies for promoting your creative work and scholarship and helping to represent you and your institution in positive ways.

Ultimately, with and without tenure, we as professors must negotiate and manage with conviction and clarity how to speak out -- especially when it relates to human rights and freedom, two values that higher education must preserve and hold dear. And we must ask questions and learn from one another how to do this so we are not deterred by fear.

As writer and civil rights activist Audre Lorde said about oppression, silence and voice, “We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have

been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.”