

University administrators should not get to vote

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The case of Robert Buckingham illustrates why *ex officio* members of academic senates should not be voting members: they cannot exercise independence in judgement or action without risking their jobs.

Robert Buckingham was the dean of the School of Public Health at the University of Saskatchewan from 2009 until last Wednesday (14 May). Buckingham had spoken publicly against bringing public health into the department of medicine. He also publicly revealed that U of S president Illene Busch-Vishniac had cautioned administrators to keep their criticisms of the restructuring to themselves.

Buckingham will remain a professor of public health. The university had originally sought to fire him outright, but, because as a professor he is protected contractually by academic freedom, the university backtracked and relieved him only of his deanship.

The academic senate at a university is that university's highest body with regard to policies that affect teaching, learning, and research at the university. Most members of an academic senate will be professors elected by their peers, the other professors. Some members, though, will be senators by virtue of the office they hold. It is not unusual in Canada for such *ex officio* members to make up a third of an academic senate.

All of a university's deans are *ex officio* members, as are other high-level academic administrators, such as the Vice President Academic or Provost.

Academic administrators serve at the pleasure of the university's president or its board of governors. Unlike professors, then, they do not enjoy the contractually-protected freedom to criticise their university publicly. Once a decision has been made, they must not only carry it out but support it or, at least, not question it publicly. A professor, on the other hand, while required to follow whatever rules his or her collective agreement contains, may question and criticize any decision or university policy, in private or in public, without facing discipline.

For myself, I think that academic administrators should enjoy the protection of academic freedom just as much as professors do, and for just the same reasons. The freedom to discuss and criticise university policies and the rationales behind them keeps those rationales in the public eye, where they should be. Still, even if it's proper that university presidents be able to fire academic administrators who speak out, they shouldn't be keen to do so. Silencing people just isn't in the spirit of university life.

An academic senate will function well only if it is a deliberative body in which all members are able to bring their best academic judgement to bear on the matters discussed. Its members will be able to bring their best academic judgement to bear only if they can act without

fear of discipline. Otherwise, they might not say what they think for fear of getting in trouble. *Ex officio* members, because they do not enjoy protection, cannot exercise independent judgement without putting themselves at risk.

The problem of lack of independent judgement by deans and other academic administrators is compounded by the fact that academic administrators are hired by other academic administrators. They are not hired by the professors. While one or two professors might sit on a hiring committee for a dean, most of the committee will be deans and vice presidents. The hiring committee, then, will look for a compliant dean, one willing to toe the party line and content not to exercise independent judgement or to speak out for herself.

If we want our universities to function better but are unwilling to extend academic freedom to administrators, we need at least to sit *ex officio* members of senate only as non-voting members. We should also turn hiring committees for academic administrators over to the professors.