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Professor Melinda Smith, Chair, Faculty Council, Colorado State University - Fort Collins

Melinda – I’m writing in response to the resolution adopted by Faculty Council suggesting the creation of a “mutual academic defense compact” with other Colorado institutions. As you’re aware, faculties across the country have issued similar calls – in essence wanting to know that the boards, presidents, and chancellors at their institutions will act with courage and conviction should academic freedom at our campuses come under scrutiny.

Here in Colorado, we have no better example of what such challenges mean in reality than the example set by President George Norlin at the University of Colorado in the 1920s, when members of the Ku Klux Klan had been elected to run the state government. Unwavering while under intense pressure to fire all Jewish and Catholic faculty members, Norlin stood firm and prevailed, modeling the principle that those entrusted with the care of our universities must recognize that certain lines cannot be crossed. That was a century ago, but the fundamental principles that guided Norlin’s stance haven’t changed. I believe and hope that they will be intact a century from now.

So, while I perceive I understand the context from which the resolution arose, I want to be clear: My concerns around a “compact” lie not in conviction but approach. Boards and administrations across the country have been silent in response to calls for these mutual defense compacts. I suspect this is largely because of a combination of legal issues (state entities defending an employee of another state in some situations, and in Colorado, the fact that all of us already fall under the same legal umbrella of the Attorney General of the State of Colorado) and the reality that much of what they call for is redundant within existing policies. As well, not every decision made around federal funding priorities can be or should be construed as an attack on academic freedom. Indeed, to try to argue that elected leaders shouldn’t question what we do and how we are funded is, in itself, a form of squelching freedom of debate, however we may personally feel about such choices.

It is for these reasons that as Chancellor I do not support the concept of a mutual academic defense compact as suggested by the resolution.

But lack of alignment with the approach of the resolution changes nothing about my personal conviction that positions like mine have no greater responsibility than the defense of academic freedom – and hence, of the faculty and students who exercise this freedom -- in the face of threats to limit it. Any president or chancellor who isn’t clear on this responsibility shouldn’t be in their role. Without academic freedom, we have no university – we are merely robots on an assembly line, affixing pre-approved ideas onto students who then receive diplomas for obedience, graduating with no experience of what it means to be challenged, inspired, or motivated to greater achievement. The loss of academic freedom -- including the freedom to civilly question and debate prevailing and popular ideas, even those of our own government – represents a loss of originality, innovation, intellectual conflict, and, eventually, competitiveness on the global stage. Faculty do not stand alone in upholding these freedoms; all of higher education stands together as their foundation.

How that plays out day to day is a matter of judgment that I’d suggest can’t be pre-determined by any boilerplate compact. As in the case of Norlin’s day, our defense rests with individuals being

deeply committed to the role and mission of universities. But the human beings in such roles are just that – individual and human – some are more bureaucratic than others, some stronger or weaker in character, some more willing to be the public face of an ideal, others more adept at working behind the scenes. I suspect that most of my colleagues, in the face of a crisis, would be talking with and listening closely to faculty before taking action. And generally, I'd argue, the people in these roles are as passionate as our faculty about the preservation of the university and the freedoms that underpin it. These are also individuals whom faculty members have some power to challenge and confront should we fail to rise to our responsibilities.

And keep in mind that the situations these individuals will face in the defense of academic freedom will be similarly nuanced, and, if history is any guide, it seems likely that gray areas will exist where people who love universities can and will debate about whether a specific act is or is not protected by academic freedom.

But regardless of the specific case, or the personality of the individuals involved, certain truths must remain inviolate: academic freedom must be defended with passion and rigor because its loss is the snuffing of the flame of independent thought that has long helped to illuminate our world. This is the standard to which Boards and faculties should hold the leaders who represent them.

As chancellor, I pledge to you that the CSU System will not waver in upholding our commitment to academic freedom and freedom of inquiry, just as we have long been vocal about our commitment to upholding the First Amendment rights of free speech and debate, as the law of our land. Nothing that has occurred has changed any of that from Norlin's day to now. To nurture the flame of independent thought is our university's *raison d'être*.

Thanks for the opportunity to respond and thank you and your colleagues for all that you do.

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Dr. Tony Frank
Chancellor, Colorado State University System