

As a conservative my journey to earning my PhD and conducting research occasionally (perhaps even often) put me on the defensive as I at times had to justify my politics and support of elected officials whom I've been told, repeatedly, are solidly against what I am pursuing as a scientist. Being an outspoken conservative on a college campus sometimes makes for a lonely lunch hour, be it in a sociology department or a university research hospital. Politically I'd likely agree with many of the ideologies and opinions of the members on the governing board of the University of Arkansas system. It is for this reason that I must wholeheartedly disagree with their recent policy regarding tenure.

Lecture topics in my physiology course run the gamut of organs and systems and how the body responds to stress, environment, disease, and a host of other situations. Science can be taught in a fairly straight-forward manner where "what we know" is presented. My ethics course focuses on putting "what we know" into a series of situations and discussions which often include some rather uncomfortable and, depending upon the ideology of those listening, "offensive" discussions. While discussions might make us uncomfortable, these are just that, discussions. They are designed to push that envelope and occasionally not so much rock the boat as to punch a hole in the hull and see if we might collectively find a way to keep us afloat.

The obvious concern that would come to mind would be this latter concern, the fear of "offending" a student or guest in this course with what is said or presented. This is far from the case. I am not concerned with what I discuss in the classroom or lecture hall in regards to my career. My concern with the Board's decision lies solely in my role as a researcher.

William Harvey's discovery of how blood is pumped and flows through the body (told so eloquently in the wonderful book "Harvey's Heart") is considered amongst the great scientific discoveries in the past millennia. His findings went against hundreds of years of scientific "fact" to demonstrate that the heart was not an insignificant organ and that blood does indeed flow in the manner we now know it does. Had Harvey been working under a policy by which someone could be removed from their faculty position for a "pattern of conduct that is detrimental to the productive and efficient operation of the instructional or work environment" he likely would have chosen a less monumental pastime. This latter quote, from the new University of Arkansas System policy on tenure is the standard by which many of my colleagues must now consider the next time they plan an experiment, lecture, or discussion.

My main research focus involves studying a rare disease that virtually no one has ever heard of, a disease that offers limited funding opportunities. This disease, Lymphangiomyomatosis (LAM) affects women almost exclusively. There is no cure, treatment options are limited, and funding, which is difficult to obtain for most any researcher, is limited. LAM does not improve over time, and it does not go into remission. Often the outcome is lung transplantation in which the disease still persists and attacks the new lungs, or death. This disease is also difficult to study due to its rarity. I could switch my focus to another disease or to another population that might offer faster results (more publications, thus more exposure for my institution) and more funding (more money, something every institution requires in one form or another). Professionally, my promotion and tenure depends on doing these things successfully. As a person my goal lies somewhere in that moral zone that all researchers possess. Few of us are in this line of work for the money.

I am working to publish these results and I am partnering with medical research centers to push this work further and venture into other related diseases, the benefits of which may help thousands of women with lung disease. I consider myself blessed and incredibly fortunate that my chair, my dean, and my institution are supportive of the work that I am doing. They understand this research is often slow, particularly with the other work we do as faculty, and they are doing everything they can to help and encourage my work. If however I found myself with a not-so-supportive administration, this situation might be quite different. It is not unheard of for researchers at institutions of all levels to change their focus to something “sexier” or more high-profile (i.e. more profitable, fundable, and publishable). If I found myself in this position and I weren’t so vested personally and professionally in working with LAM, under the new policy I may fear for my position, thus my career, and I might consider the option of working on something that may not be of such benefit but may be more “acceptable” by the institution.

Free speech is only free when someone is willing to pay a price to keep it that way. I do not necessarily want my colleagues across campus to agree with me. That is not only the most boring conversation I can imagine, but also the least productive. If my colleagues had the same philosophy as do I, only one of us would need to be employed as there would be no thought, only the way it is. They have their opinions and while I may disagree with their philosophy and they may disagree with mine, this is the dynamic I want. This is the dynamic that propels not only critical thinking, but also in science and medicine. I want to work with the most liberal-leaning, far-left person I can think of, someone whose opinion is so radical and absurd in the eyes of almost everyone, someone who disagrees with me and will occasionally exhibit that “pattern of conduct that is detrimental to the productive and efficient operation of the instructional or work environment.” My “radical” ideas of conducting research are safe when I can protect the other person’s right to say what she or he wants to say and the work they choose to pursue in their respective line of research.