

Mr. Erskine Bowles, President
University of North Carolina
General Administration
P.O. Box 2688
910 Raleigh Road
Chapel Hill, NC 27515-2688

Aug. 14, 2008

RE: Citizen complaint regarding *The Vagina Monologues*

Dear President Bowles:

Several faculty members on campuses in the University of North Carolina System have expressed concern to the North Carolina Conference of the American Association of University Professors as a result of having received an email message, which originated from UNC General Administration, asking them to compile "a list of possibl[y] questionable or offensive activities (including lectures, play, and performances) during the 2007-08 academic year." According to the message, the request was in response to an unidentified citizen complaint about such events.

We have subsequently learned of a complaint from a conservative activist group, Concerned Women for America, which recently submitted a set of 276 "citizen petitions" addressed to Governor Michael Easley, urging him to oppose state funding for *The Vagina Monologues* and other allegedly "obscene, indecent, pro-homosexual and often anti-Christian programs" on the UNC campuses. The petitioners called upon the governor "to hold university administrators accountable," including the consideration of "the removal of campus leadership" if they did not act appropriately. (See enclosure.)

We believe that this request raises basic issues of academic freedom, and we would therefore urge you to take a forceful stand on behalf of academic freedom principles, should they be further challenged in this way, whether by the governor, by North Carolina citizens, or by activist groups. We also urge you to inform citizens, legislators, and the administrators of all the UNC campuses of your position on academic freedom in public universities as it continues to be misunderstood and attacked by citizens and activist groups.

In its 2007 statement on *Academic Freedom and Outside Speakers*, the American Association of University Professors took the position that because

academic freedom requires the liberty to learn as well as to teach, colleges and universities should respect the prerogatives of campus organizations to select outside speakers whom they wish to hear. The AAUP articulated this principle in 1967 in its Fifty-third Annual Meeting, when it affirmed “its belief that the freedom to hear is an essential condition of a university community and an inseparable part of academic freedom,” and that “the right to examine issues and seek truth is prejudiced to the extent that the university is open to some but not to others whom members of the university also judge desirable to hear.”

In cases of artistic productions (for example, plays, performances, and art exhibits), we believe that a standard of academic freedom must prevail—even if the artistic production is available to the general public in addition to students and professors.

We hope you agree that the discussion of controversial ideas and issues is entirely appropriate on our state university campuses. Invitations made to outside speakers and events produced and/or organized by students or faculty do not imply approval or endorsement by the institution of the views expressed by the speakers or event participants.

According to the AAUP’s 1990 statement on *Academic Freedom and Artistic Expression*

Artistic performances and exhibitions in academic institutions encourage artistic creativity, expression, learning, and appreciation. The institutions do not thereby endorse the specific artistic presentations, nor do the presentations necessarily represent the institution. This principle of institutional neutrality does not relieve institutions of general responsibility for maintaining professional and educational standards, but it does mean that institutions are not responsible for the views or the attitudes expressed in specific artistic works any more than they would be for the content of other instruction, scholarly publication, or invited speeches. Correspondingly, those who present artistic work should not represent themselves or their work as speaking for the institution and should otherwise fulfill their educational and professional responsibilities.

That these performances take place with some support from taxpayer dollars does not entitle taxpaying citizens to control those performances or to exercise any veto power over them. Indeed, the university must ensure academic freedom and students’ free speech rights in order to preserve the integrity of the state university system.

The goals of artistic expression, creativity, teaching, and learning can be achieved on our fine UNC campuses only when we resist government restrictions and ideological censorship.

Former UNC President Molly Broad won the AAUP's prestigious Alexander Meiklejohn Award for Academic Freedom in 2003 in recognition of her outstanding contribution to academic freedom. The Faculty Assembly of the University of North Carolina nominated Dr. Broad because of her resistance to demands to cancel the assigned reading of a book on the Koran for incoming students at the Chapel Hill campus. In her award acceptance speech, President Broad described the role of university administrators in preserving academic freedom, saying:

[A]s leaders entrusted with the oversight and governance of one of the very finest public universities in the nation, we have a clear duty to uphold and passionately defend the right of faculty on every UNC campus to define the curriculum, to examine and to debate ideas, however popular or unpopular those choices might be, and however much the state's nonuniversity leaders may agree or disagree with a specific campus decision.

The historic tenets of academic freedom set forth in the Code still define this university. And they are as important and as relevant today as when they were adopted by the very first Board of Governors. If we allow them to be diminished, we inflict irreparable harm to the academic stature and reputation of the entire university.

Academic freedom helps to ensure that public education achieves the greatest good for the greatest number. The North Carolina Conference of the American Association of University Professors urges you to defend academic freedom and free speech on our campuses, continuing UNC's great tradition of public education for the public good.

Please let citizens, legislators, and the administrators of all the UNC campuses know your position on academic freedom in public universities.

Please know that we are always happy to talk with you about these principles and about other issues facing higher education today. Thank you for considering our concerns.

Sincerely,

Martha McCaughey, President,
North Carolina American Association of University Professors
On Behalf of the NC-AAUP Executive Committee

Steve Wing, Vice President

Cat Warren, Past President

Jerry Pubantz, Treasurer

Janet Land, Secretary

Puri Martinez, Member-at-Large, Public Universities

Kent Blevins, Member-at-Large, Private Universities

cc: Harold Martin