

A little *constructive* criticism, please

An injection of competence and character, more than the jettisoning of tenure, is the cure for what ails the campus.

W I L L I A M R . A L L E N

EVERY INSTITUTION and profession is susceptible to fair criticism. One can fault much in the church, in Congress, and in the law, medicine, and gardening. And the realm of higher education, too, has its weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

The commonly-found problems and peccadilloes of colleges and universities include: perennial increase in tuition faster than the rate of inflation; lack of dispassionate professionalism in admitting students, specifying degree requirements, and hiring and promoting faculty; near-hysterical impatience, intolerance, and impropriety in public and private debate. But a recent book finds that the campus is *nothing* but "one of society's most outrageous and elaborate frauds." And the fault lies *wholly* on the self-centered and self-serving faculty.

It *is* true that the campus can be a haven of the inept, the lazy, the useless, even the subversive. It *is* true that overspecialized research on artificial topics of minutiae can be accorded excessive glamor while systematic teaching of truth is correspondingly denigrated.

Still, the purportedly apoplectic critic should add some things. One is that professors, like real people, vary in competence and accomplishment. The worst are parasites; but the best are impressive and even useful. As a university professor, I have tenure. Tenure provides job protection for teachers and scholars. UCLA could not fire me for any initiative short of seducing the dean's wife on the library steps at high noon.

Tenure, like other institutions and ground rules, is subject to abuse. And what is subject to abuse assuredly will be abused upon occasion. It has been said, with substantial justification, that tenure is for mediocrities: those who can well meet the competition of the academic market do not require assurance of employment. Indeed, the *more* able faculty can be injured by protection which is valuable mainly to the *less* able, partly because of the probable imposed trade-off of tenure in exchange for lower salaries for all faculty.

In any profession, the very good are outnumbered by the mediocre. Even with the tenure arrangement, the

best people can be treated badly by the multitude of mediocrities; but without tenure the best — and the valuable but non-brilliant mavericks — may not survive at all. The pressures on faculty against which tenure is to provide protection are commonly supposed to come from the community: spiteful students, disgruntled parents, politicians on the make, sensationalist journalists. Such pressures do exist. But there is, in addition, danger from within the upper echelon of the school community: biased, belligerent faculty members and administrators who do not like conservatives — or liberals; who do not like Jews — or gentiles; who do not like virtually sole reliance on mathematical doodling in research papers — or substantial reliance on literary presentation.

Tenured security *does* weaken the relation between productivity and pay. But it weakens also the possible tyranny of the mediocre majority. The tool of tenure *can* be a device to saddle the school with favored faculty of little accomplishment or promise. It can also be a shield against personal and ideological perversion of the productive but unpopular scholar and teacher.

It is naive to suppose that the problems of universities as teaching-and-learning institutions are confined to slothful or inept faculty protected by tenure. It is true that you cannot learn what you do not study. And to learn much requires a resolution and a sense — a maturing professionalism, if you please — which does not well characterize the bulk of the college clientele.

NEITHER MAINTENANCE nor abolition of tenure, by itself, will save us. The quality of higher education and its value to the community turns on more than the arrangement of employment and job-security for the faculty. No structure of legalisms can be the ultimate determinant of how we individually look at the world, formulate our criteria and aspirations, and carry ourselves in our dealings with others, ourselves, and our work.

With or without tenure provisions, the life of the mind requires commitment and competence by teacher, student, *and* administrators who stay out of the way of scholars doing the real work of the school. Character outweighs institutional constitution.

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William R. Allen, richly warrants the tenure he has long held in the UCLA Department of Economics.

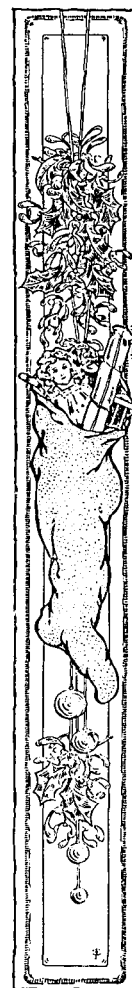
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Good, old-fashioned civic crusades

Mark Willes sets out to reunite the Times with its suburban middle-class base.

T I M W . F E R G U S O N

WHEN MARK WILLES, now the publisher of the *Los Angeles Times* as well as CEO of parent Times Mirror Corp., told the *Wall Street Journal* that he wanted to energize the gray porpoise with some good, old-fashioned civic crusades, you had to wonder. If Willes, thought by friend and foe alike to have the basic aim of reuniting the *Times* with its suburban middle-class base, is going to connect with those folks, it's hard to see how he'll do it with his existing staff. The *Times* newsroom, you'll recall, is the land of the Diversity Caucus, the all-liberal bank of political columnists and the PC stylebook. Its collective sensibility is outraged by a minimum wage on which you can't "raise a family," an under-representation (for whatever reason) of protected minorities in any desirable occupation or university, and "intolerance" (meaning, lack of legal or social recognition) shown "non-traditional lifestyles." It has not similarly been aroused by corrupt, stupid, or dishonest public officials on the left (especially if the person in question is in a protected class), by panhandling bums blighting public spaces, or by suffocating and arrogant bureaucracy. In other words, not by things that burn the middle class.

It has been necessary for guerrilla competitors such as the *Daily News*, based in the San Fernando Valley, or *New Times LA*, a free weekly, to fill this outrage void on numerous occasions. Lately, there have been hints that the *Times* is waking up: editorially, it refused to join the Los Angeles City Council majority in excusing a member "of color" — Mike Hernandez — found to be a regular crack/cocaine buyer near a schoolground. But the fount of all those news articles that paint Los Angeles in shades of class warfare runs deep. Mark Willes implies changes will come faster now that he has

put himself in direct charge. Hurry, man. The suspense is killing us.

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One little bit of *Times*-think: A profile of Prof. John Hope Franklin, the very race-conscious chairman of President Clinton's panel on race relations in America (and co-author of the notorious California textbook *Land of the Free* from the 1960s), was notable for its headline: "He Served America *Anyway*." Yes, the emphasis is added, but no one is likely to have missed the point in the original.

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The *Orange County Register* thought it was time to address delicately (on Page 1) the matter of state Sen. Bill Craven, who has had for some time what they like to call in junior high school an "attendance problem." A rather severe one because, as the *Register* noted, he'd been missing 90 percent of the upper house's votes since the start of the year. The matter is touchy because he's suffering from emphysema and diabetes. But the subject also is politically loaded because Republican Sen. Craven, 76, is of the old get-along, go-along school of GOP legislators. Translation: he's been a pretty safe vote (he used to vote more often) for the Democrat leadership's bills. Therefore, for reasons of representation as well as partisanship (his northern San Diego County/southern Orange County district is rock-solid conservative), it might legitimately be suggested that Sen. Craven kindly step aside before his scheduled term limit in 1998. Particularly when, as the *Register* demurely noted late in the story, he has not been shy about milking the taxpayers for per diems despite his virtual invisibility in the Capitol. But then, it would be rather rude to suggest that — disturbing of the comity that our legislative bodies enjoy as long as everybody (re-

Tim W. Ferguson is California Political Review's press critic.