

Are students incompetent?

by Rick Merry

It seems that the student at the University of Alberta possesses no real power to control the hiring and firing of faculty members. The policies operative at present make no allowance for his voice on decision-making bodies regarding these procedures.

The initiation of hiring proceedings is implemented by the administrative body of each department. Four or five faculty members, elected by the faculty and approved by the Dean of the Faculty, constitute a selection committee. The investigation of the credentials of the applicants involves a scrutiny of references concerning the general standing of the applicant. The successful contender for the job becomes a full-fledged faculty member following approval by the Dean or a higher administrator.

Essentially then, the power of an appointment is delegated to the Dean. Appointment is mainly concerned with previous academic status as presented in research works and opinions of former university employers.

As far as we know, the student has never participated on such a selection committee. Dr. E. Daniel who has sat on selection committees in his position as chairman of the Department of Pharmacology, feels that a student would be wasting his time reading through stacks of qualifications. He mentioned that under the present financial conditions it has not been possible to make personal interviews with applicants from distant institutions. This means in effect that even if the student were present he would be unable to make an assessment of the applicant's teaching ability.

Two processes become important to the newly hired professor—tenure or repeal of tenure, and firing. Repeal of tenure and firing in fact, both result in the professor leaving the university.

Firing may occur at any time and is initiated by the Dean of the Faculty who submits grounds for the proposed dismissal to the University President. Upon recommendation of the President, proceedings then move to a complex circle of boards and committees. Included within this circle are the Board of Governors and an Arbitration Board. A probationary period of from two to five years precedes the consideration of a faculty member for tenure. During this period he must fulfill the stipulations presented him upon being hired. These require that he pursue a valid research program in addition to his teaching responsibilities to the students, participation in committee work and other administrative tasks, student counselling, service to the society at large and the maintenance of his academic-professional relationships within the academic community. It is the responsibility of the Dean of the faculty to submit evidence relevant to the criteria to a Tenure Committee.

The Tenure Committee is set up within the department upon recommendation of General Faculties Council.

G.F.C. is the highest governing body on the university campus. It can only be overruled in university affairs by the Board of Governors and, in practice, governs the university. It is made up of administrators, faculty members, a large percentage of students, and token representation from the Non Academic Staff.

The Committee members include the Dean of the faculty, who instigates proceedings and presents evidence, two members of the Faculty Council, (consisting of elected representatives of the departments of a faculty), two department faculty members, and the

department chairman. The committee may include others its members feel are necessary. A decision is made to either cancel appointments or to renew them. If tenure is granted, the professor becomes an indefinite fixture at the U of A, until retirement upon satisfactory fulfillment of his duties. Student participation in selection committees is non-existent.

Where do 20,000 students enter into these proceedings? One would expect that such a large body should be well represented. The 36 undergraduates and 10 graduates who sit on the General Faculties Council of 127 members, seems an appropriate number. Although GFC may elect a GFC member to a Tenure Committee upon recommendation by the committee, it has never occurred.

The evaluation system of the faculty members' performance in determining his continued existence at the institution fails to substantiate the presence of a student's voice. Supporting this situation, Dr. Willard Allen, former president of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) and presently Associate Vice-President (Academic) of the University and a GFC member, argues that the academic freedom of the professor could be in jeopardy if he were susceptible to the students' opinion. He maintains that student opinion lacks foresight and has tended to be based more on emotions than reason. The professor could therefore not be expected to function to his capacity with these pressures existent. Being not only an expert in his field, but also, like the student, a member of the university community, he should be free to express his opinions on any subject, academic or otherwise, without fear of reprisals from his students.

of the faculty? Could he not be a valid judge of his own advancement of learning? Dan Carroll, student member of the GFC, feels that the student is a capable judge of the competence of his teacher in motivating his learning process. The professor who has the honest intentions for teaching his students, one would think, would have little difficulty in finding support among them.

Dr. Allen also thinks that the student does not possess that ability which would allow him to make a decision regarding a professor's competence in his field. His knowledge of the prospective appointee's subject of teaching is indeed limited. Therefore, he is unable to make a sound assessment on hiring criteria which includes research publications. Allen questioned the right of the student to judge teaching skills on the grounds that one who has never given a lecture before would indeed be difficult to analyze in this respect.

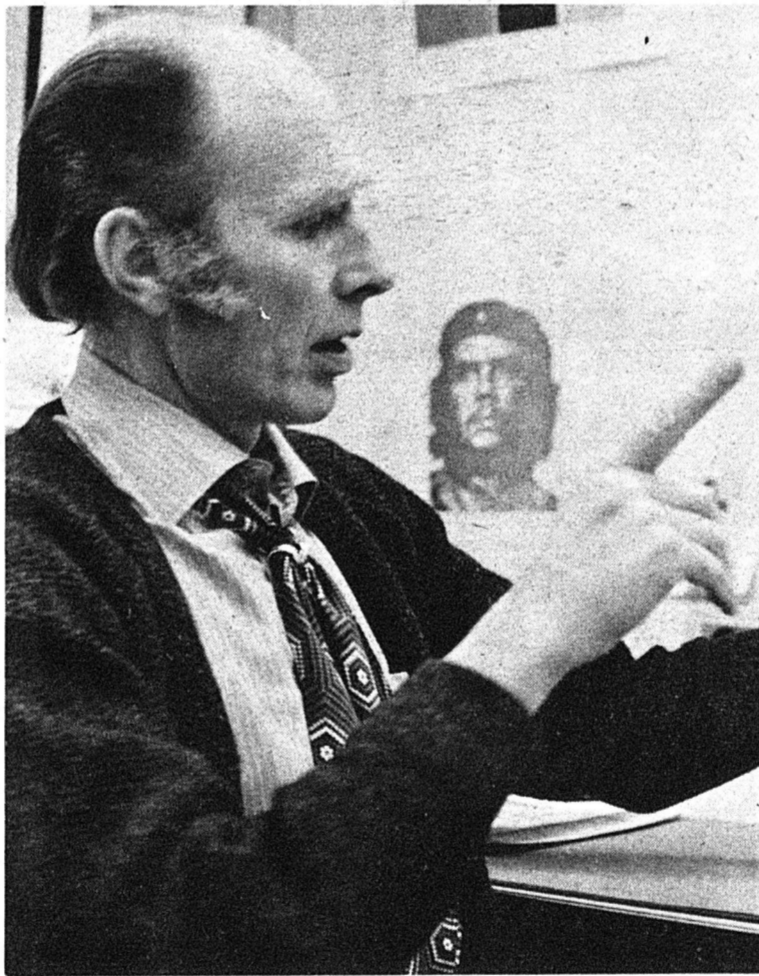
If one wishes to implement a decentralization of the decision-making specifically in the direction of the students, it is necessary to follow formal pathways to the upper power echelons. Upon looking at these pathways the student may lose his motivation quickly. As Carroll of GFC phrases it, "The informal lines for voicing opinions are so obscured by a facade of complex policies, regulations, ideologies, and committees, that the student finds it impossible to participate in, or even understand, the decision-making process. With virtually no student representation on selection and tenure committees, he finds it impractical to question his professor's presence while at the same time maintaining his academic standing with the very professor in question to him.

Two years ago, the controversy involving the issue of tenure came to a head with the firing of well-known professor of philosophy Ted Kemp. The great popularity of Kemp with his students and their generally high assessment of his teaching ability was ignored. He was not granted tenure for failing to fulfill his research duties. Kemp says it is necessary "to open all hiring and firing proceedings to the university community to keep things honest." He questions the academic ability of the professor as chief consideration in his hiring or firing and feels that "textbooks are a rip-off to the student." In saying this he meant that the student is obliged to obtain specific texts chosen by the professor which act only to compensate for the real purpose of the teacher.

It is not the integrity or ability of the individual faculty member which is the issue here, but rather the tangible ability of the student to control his own learning process. A substantial portion of this process should be carried out in the classroom under the guidance of the teacher. Under the present system, the student is judged as totally incompetent in decisions involving the teacher who controls his learning.

What are the alternatives to this situation? Obviously changing the rules and regulations is not one of these. The legitimate pathways of approach would still remain complex enough and act as a deterrent to the effective implementation of parity.

The reassessment of the purpose of the University is probably the crux of the matter. Is it to remain in the control of a jungle of ill-defined policies which are, in reality, totally under the jurisdiction of the upper administrative levels, or do we desire a place where search for truth is unsuppressed by rules and regulations? Is there a better judge than the student himself?



Ted Kemp, the professor whose battle (in 1970) for tenure, first brought the question of the hiring and firing of faculty into the light, is shown above. Although respected by students as a good teacher, Kemp was nearly denied tenure on the grounds that he did not have the necessary publications.

Can the student be judged as possessing any less degree of integrity than the Dean