The Way I See It

Faculty status for librarians? A response

By Fred Hill and Robert Hauptman

Don't give up faculty status

We were horrified by the perspective advocated by Beth J. Shapiro in "The myths surrounding faculty status for librarians" (November 1993). In order to produce a succinct response, we forego direct rebuttal of each myth and limit ourselves to the following comments.

1) There is little doubt that tenure sometimes protects the incompetent just as surgery sometimes results in death. But don't punish everyone for the inadequacies of a small percentage. Tenure exists to protect the free thinker, the radical, the person who professes unpopular ideas or theories. It is particularly necessary today when the politically incorrect can fall prey to more powerful academic forces.

Perhaps what we need is tenure in conjunction with collective bargaining. Shapiro seems to assume that administrators are always caring and correct. History does not bear this out. In any case, those who abuse tenure would probably abuse any controlling system. But, in a sense, this is all tangential to Shapiro's real point, since she only mentions the tenure of teaching faculty in order to buttress her argument that librarians should give up *their* tenure along with their faculty status.

2) Shapiro is correct when she insists that performance is the ultimate valorizing principle. But the abrogation of faculty status, after so many hard-won battles, simply because it entails additional commitments and obligations (and this is the subtext undergirding everything Shapiro says) would be extraordinarily foolhardy as well as psychologically traumatic to those who value this professional honor more than all other employee benefits including salary.

3) Shapiro's contention that faculty status has not had any beneficial effects on librarians is so wrong-headed that it cries out for comment. In the academy, status, privilege, and compensation all redound in greater measure to faculty members than to staff. Here is a simplistic example: Librarians in the Minnesota State University system receive the same compensation as teaching faculty, and since the salary schedule is fairly equitable, librarians earn a good wage. This is not the case at other institutions, where there is a disparity between the salary of librarians and the compensation of teaching faculty.

At Shapiro's hypothetical school, medical professors assuredly earn more than their colleagues in the English Department, but one can be sure that everyone is better paid than the untenurable librarians (who undoubtedly would lose their jobs under retrenchment long before a tenured neurology professor). Analogously, there was a time when people with master's degrees in instructional development attempted to help faculty members improve their courses. It did not work. These professors, whose doctorates, faculty status, and tenure gave them an inflated sense of self-importance, did not respect the nontenurable helpers.

4) Those academic librarians who do not honor faculty status and all of the obligations that accompany it—including university governance, research and publication, teaching (in various forms), and some substantive knowledge in both librarianship and at least one other discipline, should perhaps reconsider their professional commitments. Instead of advocating the abrogation of faculty status for all librarians, they might simply move over to a public or special collection. If Shapiro and those who agree with her "stop promoting unproductive issues such as faculty status," they may find themselves unemployed. ■

Fred Hill is a professor and Robert Hauptman is an associate professor at St. Cloud State University, Minnesota