25 January 2021

Kansas Board of Regents
1000 SW Jackson Street, Suite 520
Topeka, KS 66612-1368
regents@ksbor.org

Dear Members of the Board of Regents:

I am writing on behalf of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) regarding last week’s policy decision to enable “CEOs” of Kansas Regents schools over the next two years to suspend, dismiss, or terminate employees, including tenured faculty members, without initiating the process of formally declaring a financial emergency.

As President of ATHE, I speak on behalf of approximately fifteen hundred faculty members, university administrators, adjunct and part-time faculty, and graduate students across the world and I encourage you to seriously reconsider this proposal to enable suspension, dismissal, or termination of employees without due process. While I acknowledge that the challenges of these times create a need to make hard decisions, moving ahead with this policy would be a significant misstep for the universities and colleges within the Kansas system as they move forward into the twenty-first century.

ATHE aligns itself with the American Association of University Professors in support of the standard principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure, on record since 1940. Academic freedom is crucial for theatre practitioners and scholars—both as employees of higher education and as students—to advance creativity and scholarship, thereby enriching the purpose of colleges and universities in service of the common good. Within these institutions, tenure provides a vital source of protection for unrestrained research, teaching, and service. The assurance of this protection enables the disciplines studied at KS colleges and universities, including theatre programs and departments, to recruit and retain qualified individuals.

As an organization dedicated to theatre and performance, I believe it is fundamental to acknowledge that such threats to academic freedom are often disproportionately impactful on courses and faculty in programs outside the so-called STEM curricula. The performing arts are not simply important topics of study in their own right, but across the curriculum for students pursuing other careers. Regular studies and surveys of business leaders show that the skills and...
knowledges taught in studying these art forms—collaboration, creativity, clear communication, public speaking, improvisation, emotional intelligence—are valuable across all career paths. In *Artistic Literacy* (2012), Professor Nancy Kindelan clearly articulates the value of theatre pedagogy to the contemporary learner, writing “A theatre program's high-impact curricular and pedagogical practices develop Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) essential learning outcomes by encouraging cross-departmental connections, improving problem-solving skills through active rather than passive learning, and enriching cultural understanding and civic responsibility through problem-based inquiry—the study of plays and performances” (118).

The need for greater public investment in higher education has never been greater than it is today, in our current climate of division and polarized public discourse. When we don’t protect our university faculty members’ freedom to create and participate in open-ended questioning, we endanger the quest for deeper understanding as well as the ways in which advances in insight can be applied to today’s multifaceted challenges.

I am happy to discuss this further with you, should you have questions or concerns. I can be reached at president@athe.org.

Sincerest Regards,

Joshua Abrams, PhD
President, Association for Theatre in Higher Education

Director of Learning and Teaching
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