

# What Right Has an Alumnus?

**A**ROUND the faculty coffee table, conversation touched on a variety of subjects—legislative committee hearings, spring vacation, Britain's plight with the European common market, new buildings to be erected on campus this fall, free tax advice solicited from an accounting professor, and so on.

As this typical session was breaking up, the botany teacher asked the philosopher, "Where are you headed this hour?"

"I'm going to Kaufman Hall and tell them the truth," replied the philosopher.

This facetious remark by a man noted for his good humor and profound knowledge, who is also a master teacher, brought a smile to the listeners. In this parting comment he had actually said in a word his basic purpose in life, philosophy of teaching.

Academic freedom is simply the achievement of this purpose, secured through defense of the teacher's right to tell the students the truth, as he sees it, based on a lifetime of study and scholarly effort.

Where does the alumnus fit into this picture? He has been told repeatedly that he is a member of the University family with a personal vested interest in the quality and the integrity of the institution. Therefore, he is an interested party. He has every reason to defend the professor's right to speak the truth. And traditionally, well-informed alumni have been defenders of this right. On the other hand, it is not the right of an alumnus or an administrator, legislator, businessman, lawyer, doctor, to tell the professor what is truth and what is fiction. This decision is the professor's alone to make. It is assumed that as a teacher and a scholar he is best-qualified to make the decision. He has assembled the facts, applied an evaluation based on investigations, experience and judgment, and what he has to say on the subject is assumed to be significant.

The right of the alumnus to be heard is somewhat the same as that of the parent or the student. The bond between an alumnus and his alma mater is based on assumptions—that the alumnus understands the faculty and the objectives of the institution; that he supports the institution with his time and money, and from time to time, is asked for advice about development of new pro-

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grams, administrative policy, even for his evaluation of new ideas. He is often asked to interpret policies or events of the University to his community and to discuss University needs with members of the legislature and with other alumni. As he accepts responsibility in these matters he acquires the right to express his opinions.

Opinions of prominent alumni were considered in action taken by the University in developing the bachelor of liberal arts degree program, in adopting the policy of University participation in financing fraternity housing, in limiting the use of automobiles by students, in placing emphasis on research and advanced study, and many other recent moves by the University.

Alumni participation in developing ideas is an acquired status rather than a right. Although he has the constitutional right to speak, he must earn the weight given his opinions by his own ability and good judgment.

Our society will be the loser if the time ever comes when it cannot face, in fact, does not solicit the ideas, the opinions, the knowledge of the best brains of the day. Whether they be inside or outside the academic community is of little significance.

**P**EOPLE who have something important to say, regardless of how controversial it may be, should be willing to defend their ideas in open debate. There have been many such debates on this campus, and these will continue in the future. A series of programs have been held on the campus this year wherein alumni are invited to express opinions on scholarly matters and to compare their conclusions with those of professors taking part in the programs.

The exchange and testing of ideas is the essence of the learning process at the adult Center for Continuing Education. It is not at all unusual for a professor to come from an adult short course or seminar with the feeling that he learned more from the experience than did the students.

If the subject is academic freedom, all this may sound far-afield, but is it? Such immunity as academic freedom offers has no justification except as it may result in benefit to mankind. Ideas have drastically changed the habits and conditions of man within the span of a lifetime. Just how much academic freedom had to do with this is debatable; however, there is no doubt that the social climate in which these people worked, and in which academic freedom is a characterizing feature, is conducive to creative thinking.

The alumnus understands the importance of the academic environment. He is interested in the quality and the integrity of the University. He likes to be identified as a member of the University family, to be called upon as interpreter of its needs and ambitions. And when, at times, his interpretations involve defense of a professor's freedom to speak the truth, the alumnus can be the institution's most effective spokesman for academic freedom.

—RBG