

Order of the Golden Bear



The Usual Place, October 27th, 2015

The topic for tonight's discussion concerned campus faculty. The conversation was focused primarily around expectations students, alumni, and faculty members have of the faculty as well as the expectations faculty members have for the University, their peers, and their students.

This topic came in response to concerns over the handling of faculty related issues in recent press, including the non-renewal of Alexander Coward's contract in the Mathematics Department and the handling of Geoffrey Marcy's misconduct in the Astronomy Department.

A few weeks ago, Professor Coward waived his right to confidentiality after his contract with the university was not renewed by math department faculty, claiming that he was fired essentially for being too good at his job. In an online statement, Coward cited statistics highlighting his stellar performance, unmatched by others in the department, as proof that his contract was wrongly terminated. One Fellow discouraged Fellows from casting judgment too soon as the Math Department is unable to comment on the issue due to confidentiality policies designed to protect faculty (including Coward). Another Fellow noted that Coward was not fired but that the department just allowed his contract to expire without renewing him for another term. On the whole, Student Fellows called for more transparency from campus departments and administration on the issue of hiring and firing professors as students are adversely affected when they are not handled appropriately.

While, there was debate amongst Fellows as to whether or not Coward's contract should have been renewed in light of his performance record, Fellows unanimously expressed contempt for Professor Geoffrey Marcy's admitted misconduct. It was revealed a few weeks ago that a campus investigation confirmed claims that Marcy had a history of sexually harassing female students. A few Fellows expressed concern over the seemingly "mixed messages" released by the administration on the matter. It appeared as though in early statements, the administration stood by their investigation, which resulted in no serious repercussions for Marcy. Later, after the issue made national headlines, the administration claimed that it didn't have the authority to unilaterally impose disciplinary actions without a long and protracted legal process. One Fellow suggested that this issue and issues like it involving faculty should go to the UC Office of the President, claiming that this matter may have been better handled with a process external to the university itself. Other Fellows claimed that there needed to be more avenues for people to report

behavior like Marcy's in a serious and confidential manner. When news broke about Coward and Marcy, many people juxtaposed the cases of the two faculty members. Some Fellows claimed that in both the Marcy and Coward cases, faculty acted in ways that did not necessarily align with the needs of students (Coward proved to be a good teacher, but was not renewed while Marcy's inexcusable behavior had been an open secret amongst faculty for years). These Fellows called for more transparency and a greater degree of student when these issues occur.

Aside from conversation about two high profile faculty members, Fellows also discussed pressing issues facing the university in regards to adjunct and tenured faculty. Many Fellows noted discrepancies in the treatment of tenured and adjunct faculty from wages, to access to opportunities, to a perceived general lack of concern for the needs of adjunct faculty. Tenured professors, on the other hand, are granted more privileges and a greater degree of protection. Many Fellows noted that with the increasing reliance of the university on adjunct faculty, their treatment on campus warrants higher scrutiny. Some Fellows noted that they had classes with relatively famous or renowned tenured professors in math and science courses who were clearly competent in their subject matter, but were seemingly incapable of making course content accessible to novice students. Other Fellows argued that they preferred tenured professional educators for introductory undergraduate courses because they have more experience working with the material year after year and are keen in knowing how to meet students where they are. Concurring, a few other Fellows noted that adjunct faculty might be better suited to teaching upper division courses for which they have specialized knowledge to share with students. A few Fellows suggested that high profile tenured professors could be better off in upper division courses for the same reason. A number of Fellows noted that time and time again, many of the faculty members—no matter their treatment—chose UC Berkeley because of the quality of students and the academic integrity the university maintains.

Fellows brainstormed a number of solutions to improve conditions for faculty and students on campus. In regards to issues of harassment and assault, a one Fellow noted that students should provide feedback to the ASUC, which is currently undergoing a process of collecting feedback from students about problems with faculty to deliver to policymakers on campus. Another Fellow noted that students should write letters to people in the appropriate channels to spark change, noting that online posting fosters little actual change. A few Fellows urged students to take student evaluations seriously and use them as an opportunity to influence contract renewals, claiming that students really do have a lot of power as the evaluations weigh heavily in decision-making processes. Finally, another Fellow claimed that alumni should be more involved in the process of selecting and securing faculty. This Fellow suggested that while alumni will agree that students should have the best possible educational experience, alumni should have more conversations to figure out just what the "best experience" entails and how they can get more involved in the selection process.