

**Remarks to the Board of Regents
Regarding Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression
President Ray Cross
December 11, 2015**

It is good for this Board, as have previous Boards, to reaffirm our commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression.

Periodically, we all need to be reminded of the foundational principles upon which this great university was built.

About 130 years ago, your predecessors vigorously defended Professor Ely's academic freedom with adoption of the now famous "*sifting and winnowing*" report. In doing so, they carved "academic freedom and freedom of expression" forever into the foundational bedrock of this university. Ely later claimed that the Board's guarantee of academic freedom was so important that it was the equivalent of Wisconsin's Magna Charta.

The "sifting and winnowing" metaphor both inspires and obligates us. It inspires us because it moves us emotionally with its simple, yet eloquent, expression of a truth -- a truth that has endured -- that learning communities must have unfettered freedom in their pursuit of truth. It has become the symbolic cornerstone of this great university.

Just like the English poet and scholar John Milton argued in his heralded work, *AREOPAGITICA* back in the 1600's, the Board realized that by letting truth and falsehood grapple in a free and open encounter, truth would prevail.

Yes, that 1894 Board report was inspirational. But, it was not merely inspirational; it also obligated the entire university community to constantly be vigilant in their defense of these freedoms. Even today, if you listen carefully, you can still hear the continuing echoes of that Board of Regents and several subsequent Boards urging us to diligently guard this precious legacy.

In 1894 the university enrolled less than 1200 students. Most of them were from Wisconsin. Most of them were white males. Today, we enroll over 180,000 students representing every country, corner and culture of the world. This is a dramatically different university than it was in 1894 when your predecessors permanently seared this now cherished principle into this university's conscience.

But this principle, one of the foundational pillars upon which this university was built, like all great truths, remains. Threats from subtle foes and disguised forces must be challenged and overcome because this principle is that important. In fact, Milton wisely argued that the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience is above all other liberties. If we, the entire university community, fail to value,

protect and defend these fundamental freedoms, the university will fail. That is why this obligation is so important.

If the priority assigned to free expression by the nature of a university is to be maintained in practice, clearly the responsibility for maintaining that priority rests with its members.

As president of this University System I challenge all of us within the university to recommit ourselves to upholding the commitments to academic freedom and freedom of expression made by earlier Boards and reaffirmed today by this Board of Regents.

Thank you.