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Grove City College makes quiet move for what's right

There's cause for quiet celebration this week at Grove City College after a national academic organization lifted a sanction against the school that had endured for more than a half-century.

Delegates to the annual meeting of the American Association of University Professors voted Saturday to lift the censure that it first imposed against Grove City College in 1963, after the dismissal of a history professor named Larry Gara. The AAUP had ruled Gara was not afforded sufficient due process.

The lifting of the censure signifies that the college has "taken the necessary steps to address the AAUP's outstanding concerns" regarding administrative procedure, according to an AAUP news release.

Grove City College had been on the censure list longer than any other institution.

On the surface, it might not seem like such a big deal. After all, the college has been doing just fine — flourishing, in fact — despite the AAUP censure.

But it is a big deal, for at least two reasons.

First, censure by the AAUP informs the academic community that the administration of an institution has violated generally recognized principles and standards of academic freedom and tenure. The AAUP investigates and exposes infringements of generally accepted governance standards.

Likewise, when an institution strives to correct prior infringements and to operate by AAUP standards, the organization lifts the sanction — as it did for Grove City on Saturday.

By AAUP standards, Professor Gara should have been a tenured professor. He had 10 years of college teaching experience, five of them with Grove City. But the college didn't grant tenure status to any professor — and it still doesn't. Every GCC instructor and administrator serves under a renewable one-year contract.

GCC officials said Gara was let go because of incompetence and brutal grading, while the AAUP contends Gara was not given due process — he was never formally advised his job was in jeopardy and, once dismissed, for what reason. There were implications that Gara, a Quaker pacifist twice imprisoned for civil disobedience, might have been dismissed for other, unspoken reasons.

While the fact that the censure has been eliminated is significant in itself, what may be even more significant is that it required cooperation between the AAUP and the Grove City College administration and trustees — whose predecessors had elected not to participate in the AAUP's investigation of Gara's dismissal in 1963.

In the college's news release issued Saturday, college President Paul J. McNulty said the school "is pleased with AAUP's membership vote, and we especially appreciate the association's assistance in achieving a complete resolution of this issue. Being on the censure list for 53 years was not representative of what we are as a faith-based institution and doesn't reflect our long-standing commitment to fairness and respect for our employees."

That's a generous expression of acknowledgment and appreciation — a statement that springs from an earnest effort to make amends.

The effort began in 2013 when the college entered into discussions with AAUP officials to resolve the matter. The effort included a visit at the home of Professor Gara, now in his 90s, to acknowledge that under procedures in place today, his situation with the college would have been handled quite differently than it was years ago.

The bigger development is that Grove City College has now demonstrated its commitment to a policy of due process. That's a refreshing and long overdue development.