



---

## Letter to President Sproul from Clarence A. Dykstra, February 23, 1949

---

### [Letter, February 23, 1949]

February 23, 1949

PRESIDENT SPROUL:

I hand you herewith a brief report on the Forum, conducted by the Graduate Students' Association with Dr. Merritt Benson and Dr. Herbert Phillips, both members of the University of Washington faculty for many years, as speakers on February 17, 1949 on the campus at Los Angeles. The question for debate had to do with the problem of whether an instructor professing Communism could be an objective teacher and an impartial searcher for truth in the sense understood on a university campus. Dr. Phillips has recently been dismissed from the University of Washington faculty for "incompetency," and Dr. Benson is Professor of Journalism on the University of Washington faculty and was recommended to me by President Allen of the University of Washington in a telegram which offered him as a speaker on our campus.

On February 15, I signed the permission blanks for the meeting of the Graduate Students and wrote, as a footnote on the blanks "This is authorized as a meeting of graduate students and a Forum, at which both sides are presented. This is not an open meeting, but one for graduate students." I set this down after some discussion with the graduate students, at which discussion the question was raised as to whether many would not try to get into this meeting who were not members of the Graduate Students' Association and by so doing, prevent bona fide members from attending the session.

The dismissal of three members of the University of Washington faculty on January 22, was given wide publicity. The New York Times, for instance, among other papers, had a special correspondent on the spot to tell the story. Commentators discussed the situation on the radio and Town Hall of New York announced that on February 22 the "dismissal" would be the topic for its weekly debate over the air. The weekly magazines gave attention to this question and quite naturally, it was the topic of discussion on many campuses, particularly by graduate students and members of the faculty. The incident further has been called to the attention of the American Association of University Professors, which body will unquestionably make a report on the situation at the University of Washington. It seems to me that when permission was asked to hold the above-mentioned meeting that if this subject was of sufficient interest for the newspapers, the magazines, commentators, and Town Hall of New York to discuss it openly, mature students should be allowed to hear a debate between two people, who were in the middle of the controversy, both of whom had already debated the question at Reed College in Portland, and probably are expected to debate it again. In my opinion, it is of high importance to raise the question of thought control on our campuses and strike early, if it appears that such control is raising its ugly head. It was the belief of President Allen and The Regents of the University of Washington that such controls were likely to appear with professed Communists on the faculty. The question is now under general debate in many places.

— 2 —

You should know that after the permission was given the Graduate Club, petitions were passed on campus, illegally, it might be said, asking that the meeting of the Club be made an open meeting for all students.

The Associated Students at their meeting the night before the Forum, refused to recognize these petitions but went on record asking the President of the Associated Students, Bill Keene, to ask the Provost whether it would be possible to have an open meeting. Since this question had been under discussion with the Graduate Students, themselves, and the matter had been decided, the Provost told Bill Keene over the telephone that/ he did not see, particularly since the petition had not come to him or been brought to his attention, how we could change arrangements at such a late hour. When asked whether another meeting might be called to hear the debate, I had to tell Keene that Professor Benson would be leaving the City on Friday morning and there would be no chance, therefore, for a follow-up. It was this conversation, together with my notation on the application for permission, that gave rise to the story which had circulation that the Provost had refused to allow undergraduates to hear this debate.

It was the opinion of Andrew Hamilton, in charge of our News Bureau, that on the whole, the press handled the matter very well with the possible exception of one story.

At the debate itself, Professor Benson representing the University of Washington, held that a member of the Communist Party is not a free agent, and since he is not a free agent, cannot be considered competent to hold a position requiring independent thought and scientific objectivity. Dr. Phillips held that a man's political belief made no difference so long as he proved himself capable of giving competent instruction in the fields in which he was assigned. He said further that the Communist Party in the United States does not advocate the violent overthrow of the United States Government and, in his opinion, was not bound to any foreign nation or group in a foreign nation. I take these statements from the Daily Bruin, since I was not present at the meeting.

There has been a good deal of complaint, as you know, that vital issues strongly held, particularly in the political and religious field, cannot be discussed on a campus of the University of California. In my opinion, the rule of the Regents does not prevent the discussion of controversial questions so long as both sides are presented, and the meeting is a bona fide meeting of recognized organizations. On the other hand, no partisan or sectarian meeting is to be allowed. I would be glad to have your opinion on this reading of the rule.

I assume that you know something of the background of this Washington case. The University Faculty Committee on Tenure and Academic Freedom, between October 27 and December 15, 1948, conducted a trial of six members of the faculty. The University and the faculty members were represented by counsel. Among the witnesses brought to the trial was a Professor from the University of California at Berkeley. The faculty hearing cost the University about \$10,000. Three thousand typewritten pages of testimony were taken. The Tenure Committee voted 8 to 3 not to dismiss the accused professors.

— 3 —

Five of the eight voted as they did upon the theory that the Tenure Code set up by the President and Regents of the University of Washington did not permit the discharge of a teacher solely on the ground of belonging to a legal political party, and that such membership did not constitute proof of incompetency. The President and the Regents held with the minority and dismissed three professors, two of whom admitted being Communists, and one who denied membership. The other three who were tried admitted they had once belonged to the Communist Party but did not any longer and they were put upon probation for two years.

Professor Benson left in our office an abstract of the testimony, together with a statement of the case from the point of view of the Administration and his (Benson's) speech. I shall be glad to send them to you if you want them.

C. A. Dykstra  
CAD: fw