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Tuesday, September 12, 2006

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BYU action on Jones lamented

By [Tad Walch](#)

Deseret Morning News

PROVO — Leaders of the American Association of University Professors are criticizing Brigham Young University for placing physics professor Steven Jones on paid leave while university administrators conduct a review of his statements and research about the attacks on the World Trade Center.

AAUP general secretary Roger Bowen called BYU's decision "distressing" and said Jones shouldn't have been removed from teaching two classes this semester for statements made outside the classroom.

Jones has said he discussed his theory in classes only after students asked questions. Jones has published a paper — www.journalof911studies.com — suggesting that evidence shows the World Trade Center towers fell on Sept. 11, 2001, because of pre-set demolition charges, not just because they were struck by airplanes.

"Academic freedom also protects extramural utterances, that is, statements made by faculty outside the classroom when they speak as citizens," Bowen told the Deseret Morning News. "It's very clear there never should be official retribution for faculty who exercise their rights as citizens, with the very careful disclaimer they are not speaking on behalf of the university."

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What Jones said in the classroom and how careful he was about disclaimers are subjects of the university review, BYU spokeswoman Carri Jenkins said.

"The university has not come to a conclusion," she said. "This is why we're conducting a review. Professor Jones is still on campus, and he will be a part of this review."

Jenkins said some had expressed concerns to the

university about what Jones was saying in classes.

"We do believe professors must speak responsibly," Jenkins said. "Professors need to clarify when they are speaking for themselves on personal concerns. That is a point that professional organizations continue to make."

The AAUP and BYU have a long, adversarial history over questions of academic freedom at the school. The AAUP placed BYU on its list of censured schools in 1998 after the university declined to grant continuing status, its form of tenure, to professor Gail Houston. The group said infringements on academic freedom were "distressingly common" and that the climate for academic freedom was "distressingly poor."

Each year since, the AAUP has invited BYU back to the table. Each year, BYU has declined, citing its vigorous response to the AAUP in 1998.

"Our policies have not changed," Jenkins said. "Since that time our departments, colleges and the university have had accreditations reaffirmed. We have continued to put our effort into becoming a superb university, particularly concentrating on undergraduate education."

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education also criticized BYU in an article posted Monday on the U.S. News & World Report's Web site.

"BYU is literally the example we use of a university that does not promise strong free speech or academic freedom protections," FIRE president Greg Lukianoff said.

The Jones case has reopened the decades-old debate of whether BYU, owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, should be revered for allowing far freer discussion of religious topics than most universities or derided for stifling some of that speech.

Many BYU professors say they appreciate academic freedoms at BYU that they have not experienced elsewhere.

In Houston's case, BYU officials said they warned her that endorsing prayer to a Heavenly Mother was inappropriate at BYU. Jones' case is unusual at BYU because it does not revolve around religion or religious values. BYU decided not to rehire part-time philosophy instructor Jeffrey Nielsen in June after he, by his own admission, clearly affiliated himself with the university when he wrote an editorial in the Salt Lake Tribune opposing the LDS Church's stand against gay marriage.

Academic freedom debates have engulfed other university instructors who joined Scholars for 9/11 Truth, an organization Jones co-founded.

The University of Wisconsin conducted a 10-day review of Kevin Barrett, a part-time professor, for statements he described to the Deseret Morning News as "far more radical, inflammatory and potentially offensive to public sensibilities than anything Professor Jones has said."

Barrett wrote and published a satirical letter to the U.S. Secret Service predicting President Bush would be executed for high treason. Wisconsin's chancellor cleared Barrett, citing academic freedom.

"If BYU tries to violate this clear-cut, long-established norm of academic freedom, it will set itself up for a very unfavorable place in history, immediately trigger the wrath of virtually the entire U.S. and world academic community and soon become a target of the righteous

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wrath of the American people," Barrett said.

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