



American Association of University Professors

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**AN OPEN LETTER ON OUTSIDE SPEAKERS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM FROM
THE AAUP PRESIDENT, CARY NELSON**

In 2005--after several colleges and universities withdrew valid invitations to speakers during the 2004 election cycle--the American Association of University Professors published a statement on "Academic Freedom and Outside Speakers." Now that another election cycle is upon us, it is important to reiterate our policy's key points:

1. Many colleges and universities permit student and faculty groups to issue their own invitations to outside speakers. That practice is an important part of academic freedom and institutions should respect it.
2. When an authorized faculty or student group invites an outside speaker, this does not mean the institution approves or disapproves of the speaker or what the speaker says, has said or will say.
3. Colleges are free to announce that they do not officially endorse a speaker or the views a speaker expresses, but they should not cancel a speech because people on campus or in the community either disagree with its content or disapprove of the speaker.
4. Institutions should ensure that all legitimately invited speakers can express their views and that open discussion can take place.
5. Only in extreme and extraordinary cases may invitations be canceled out of concern for safety.

We believe education is best served by the free pursuit of all ideas, including controversial ones. Yet this commitment to academic freedom can be severely tested when campus or community members are offended by the views an invited speaker is expected to express. How should we respond when some claim an invitation amounts to an endorsement of a politician, a religion, or even an outlandish conspiracy theory? Should a university president, a board of trustees, or a group of concerned citizens or donors have the right to demand that an invitation to a speaker be withdrawn?

If the College Republicans invite Dick Cheney to speak about the "war on terror" the talk may be controversial, but if the College Republicans is a valid student organization, neither the Board of Trustees nor the administration should cancel the talk. Although administrators have sometimes cited fear of violating section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code as a reason for canceling invitations to politically controversial speakers, such invitations do not constitute the type of prohibited political campaign intervention or participation that would endanger the university's tax exempt status. The university does not endorse a particular speaker's views any more than it endorses the content of a particular book in its library.

Nor should the university compel a student group to invite an opposing speaker to ensure "balance" or create a debate format. It would be improper for a university administration to require the College Republicans to invite Barak Obama in order to "balance" Dick Cheney. Campus groups should not be compelled to invite someone they do not want to hear as a condition for inviting someone they do want to hear. A different student group can invite Obama, or the university can create its own event and add it to the campus schedule.

What happens if taxpaying citizens, state politicians, or important donors demand that the president cancel a planned speech? University presidents, who have many constituencies to please, may find this a difficult situation. Matters can become very complicated if different groups make contradictory demands. Satisfying one group may offend another. That difficulty can be avoided if a president does the right thing by defending academic freedom and the university's unique role as a place for ideas to flourish and to be exchanged. A president is not responsible for defending a speaker who has been properly invited by an authorized student, faculty, or employee group. Authorizing these groups to invite outside speakers that are of interest to them is an important way to sustain a vibrant campus intellectual life. Such a practice can be supported by all campus constituencies.

This reasoning holds true even when virtually everyone disagrees with an invited speaker. Students might at one time have invited an American Nazi Party representative to speak. The invitation might have sought to give the campus direct experience of a position all considered abhorrent. Once again, we should not assume that invitations represent endorsements. We should also give some credit to our student audiences. They do not need to be protected from outlandish ideas. They do not believe everything they hear, and they are on campus to learn to think critically.

Revulsion at ideas or fear of them is understandable, but ideas are best answered with thought and conversation, not with censorship. That is nowhere more true than at a college or university. Education will not be well served if only bland speakers with uncontroversial views are invited to campus. The costs--to education, to academic freedom, to the social good--are virtually always higher when an invited speaker is silenced rather than allowed to speak.

The opening five points represent the consensus reached at a September 2006 meeting where representatives of several higher education organizations discussed the AAUP's full statement on outside speakers. We should add that administrators appropriately may specify that no member of the academic community may speak for or act on behalf of the college or university in a political campaign.

For more information, the full statement, "Academic Freedom and Outside Speakers," is available on the AAUP website:

<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/About/committees/committee+repts/CommA/outside-spkr.htm>

You may also call AAUP at 1 800 424 2973.