David B. Downing, English, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Candidate Biography

I received my Ph.D. in English from SUNY/Buffalo in 1980. I began teaching full-time in 1979 at Eastern Illinois University, and in 1988, I moved to Indiana University of Pennsylvania where I currently serve as the Director of Graduate Studies in Literature and Criticism.

Early in my academic career, I became interested in the history of the university. Beginning in the 1980s, I wrote a series of essays on these topics, and this work led to, among others, the publication of the co-edited collection Beyond English, Inc.: Curricular Reform in a Global Economy (2002), and The Knowledge Contract: Politics and Paradigms in the Academic Workplace (2005).

During the past decade I have published such directly related essays as “Global Capitalism, Scientific Management, and Disciplinary English” (2004); “Academic Freedom as Intellectual Property: When Collegiality Confronts the Standardization Movement” (2006); “Autonomy vs. Insecurity: The (Mis)Fortunes of Mental Labor in a Global Network;” (2008), and “World Bank University: The War on Terror and the Struggles for the Global Commons,” (forthcoming, 2012).

I edit the scholarly journal, Works and Days, with several recent volumes devoted to the transformation of the university and the threats to academic freedom. These include Information University: Rise of the Education Management Organization (2003); Richard Ohmann: A Retrospective (2005); and Academic Freedom and Intellectual Activism in the Post-9/11 University (2009). A much edited version of the latter volume was published in fall, 2010, as a book, Academic Freedom in the Post-9/11 Era.

In 2011 I was nominated and appointed to the Modern Language Association Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities. Work on this committee is directly relevant to the AAUP.

Candidate Statement

These are, indeed, hard times for higher education. Especially with the draconian cuts to public university funding, working conditions for most faculty have deteriorated. With the erosion of tenure and shared governance, more than 70% of university and college teachers now experience relatively little of the job security required for any genuine form of academic freedom. If teachers can be threatened with loss of employment because they publish or teach unpopular ideas, inquiry is not free. Academic freedom matters because it models for us, for our society, the way a community of inquirers holds itself responsible for truth. Vulnerable working conditions matter to us all when they compromise teaching, research, and service.

Under these circumstances, the AAUP mission is clearly to redefine for our own age the fundamental grounds of education in a democracy. Nothing less is at stake. And the AAUP has taken on this role with varying degrees of success over its entire history. More than ever, the AAUP must advocate for the “common ground” of academic freedom necessary for free inquiry and informed debate. While tenure protects freedom of thought and thus serves as the best practical guarantor of academic freedom, the AAUP has consistently
affirmed that academic freedom pertains to
all faculty, part-time, temporary, as well as
tenure-track members of the profession.

My commitment is to strengthen the
advocacy role of the AAUP. For the entire
31 years of my full-time teaching career, I
have been a member of organized faculty
labor unions, and I have always been
working in solidarity with my colleagues to
protect academic freedom through
negotiating fair and equitable bargaining
unit contracts. As a current member of the
MLA Committee on Academic Freedom and
Professional Rights and Responsibilities, I
am in a position to serve as an effective
liaison between these organizations in their
shared fight for the rights of faculty and
students in higher education.