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Statement on the Liberal Arts Disciplines

In recent years, the disciplines of the liberal arts, once universally regarded as central to the intellectual life of the university, have been steadily moved to the periphery and increasingly threatened—by some administrators, elected officials, journalists, and parents of college-age children. The study of the history of human societies and forms of human expression is now too often construed as frivolous, and several colleges and universities have recently announced the wholesale elimination of liberal arts departments. Politicians have proposed linking tuition to the alleged market value of given majors. Students majoring in literature, art, philosophy, and history are routinely considered unemployable in the technology and information economy, despite the fact that employers in that economy strenuously argue that liberal arts majors make great tech-sector workers precisely because they are trained to think critically and creatively, and to adapt to unforeseen circumstances.

The American Association of University Professors and the Association of American Colleges and Universities are not disciplinary organizations, but we believe that institutions of higher education, if they are truly to serve as institutions of *higher* education, should provide more than narrow vocational training and should seek to enhance students' capacities for lifelong learning. This is as true of open-access institutions as it is of highly selective elite colleges and universities. The disciplines of the liberal arts—and the overall benefit of a liberal education—are exemplary in this regard, for they foster intellectual curiosity about questions that will never be definitively settled—questions about justice, about community, about politics and culture, about difference in every sense of the word. All college students and not solely a privileged few should have opportunities to address such questions as a critical part of their educational experience. And the disciplines of the liberal arts are central to the ideal of academic freedom, as well, because the liberal arts, by their nature, require free rein to pursue truth wherever it may lead. As a result, they provide an intellectual bulwark for academic freedom.

Almost eighty years ago, in their joint 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, the AAUP and AAC&U emphasized that “institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good” and that “the common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.” The free search for truth and its free exposition in the liberal arts are essential components of a functioning democracy. Higher education's contributions to the common good and to the functioning of our democracy are severely compromised when universities eliminate and diminish the liberal arts.