
The Freedom to Teach

The following statement was approved by Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure in November 2013.

The freedom to teach includes the right of faculty members to select the materials, determine the approach to the subject, make the assignments, and assess student academic performance in teaching activities for which they are individually responsible, without having their decisions subject to the veto of a department chair, dean, or other administrative officer. Teaching duties that are commonly shared among a number of faculty members require a significant amount of coordination and the imposition of a certain degree of structure, often involving a need for agreement on such matters as general course content, syllabi, and examinations.¹

In a multisection course taught by several faculty members, responsibility is often shared among the instructors for identifying the texts to be assigned to students. Common course syllabi and examinations are also typical but should not be imposed by departmental or administrative fiat. The shared responsibility bespeaks a shared freedom, which trumps the freedom of an individual faculty member to assign a textbook that he or she alone considers satisfactory. The individual's freedom in other respects, however,

remains undiluted. Individuals should be able to assign supplementary materials to deal with subjects that they believe are inadequately treated in the required textbook. Instructors also have the right to discuss in the classroom what they see as deficiencies in the textbook; doing so could turn out to be as effective in engaging the students as requiring them to use an alternate textbook. These principles apply equally to faculty in the tenure system and those with contingent appointments. Although, under these circumstances, the decisions of the group may prevail over the dissenting position of a particular individual, the deliberations leading to such decisions ought to involve substantial reflection and discussion by all those who teach the courses. The department should have a process for periodically reviewing curricular decisions and altering them based on a consensus of the appropriate teaching faculty, subject to review at other levels of governance.

Note

1. Substantially the same paragraph appears in "Academic Freedom in the Medical School," *Academe* 85 (July–August 1999): 59–60.