

Academic Freedom in the Classroom

Columbia University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors
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In light of the recent [Agreement](#) between Columbia and the federal government, and in light of reports of complaints being lodged against faculty for classroom speech, many Columbia instructors are confused and anxious about their right to academic freedom in the exercise of their pedagogical duties.

The Columbia Chapter of the AAUP urges all faculty not to muzzle themselves preemptively but rather to persist in the exercise of their academic freedom, which pertains not only to research but also to teaching. The guidelines issued by the National AAUP state that academic freedom 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.” This right depends on instructors’ professional expertise as judged by their professional peers and on their respectful and ethical conduct in the classroom, but it in no way precludes discussion of controversial material germane to the subject at hand.

It should be noted that the Agreement concluded with the federal government states (Article 5) that “No provision of this Agreement, individually or taken together, shall be construed as giving the United States authority to dictate [...] the content of academic speech.” This statement must be interpreted in light of longstanding norms relating to academic freedom in the classroom as affirmed in the AAUP guidelines cited above.

We urge instructors across the university to make a collective statement about the crucial importance of this principle by including the following paragraph (or a variation thereof) in a prominent position on their syllabi:

Knowledge flourishes when inquiry is free and respectful. This class, which has been approved as part of the Columbia curriculum by appropriate faculty bodies, aims to advance knowledge through discussion, debate, and carefully selected readings and assignments. In accordance with principles of academic freedom promulgated by the American Association of University Professors and affirmed by many universities, including Columbia, the instructor has the authority to set the class syllabus, which may include controversial material relevant to topics being studied. While all participants and their views will be treated respectfully, no one should expect to be shielded from challenging or even upsetting ideas, since thoughtfully engaging such ideas is crucial to free inquiry and intellectual growth.