



Ten Actions Chapters Can Take to Shape Quality Online Education

1. Submit a public records request for the contract.

If a contract already exists at your public institution and your chapter has been unable to get access to it, a good first step is to submit a public records request so that you can review the document and assess its impact on academic freedom, educational quality, shared governance, student privacy, reputation of the institution, and sustainability of the program. To learn about submitting a public records request in your state, review the [National Freedom of Information Coalition Map](#). For help filing your own and examples of previous public records requests, two great resources are the [Reporters Committee for the Freedom of the Press](#) and [MuckRock](#). If your chapter is at a private institution and is unable to get access to the contract, a good first step is to review similar contracts at other institutions. For more information about contracts, see the Century Foundation's [The Private Side of Public Higher Education](#).

2. Review the Terms of Use or End User Agreement used by the online platform.

Watch out for language that could undermine student and faculty rights or academic freedom principles. Often the agreement will contain an obscenity clause prohibiting material vaguely defined as pornographic or obscene. Call this to the attention of your colleagues, especially those in art history, sociology, literature, linguistics, and other disciplines where such restrictions can limit course curriculum in which obscene terms may be discussed. In 2013, the Rutgers AAUP-AFT organized a successful campaign to defend academic freedom against an obscenity clause in the agreement required by Pearson eCollege. For more on the Rutgers AAUP-AFT campaign, see "[Rutgers Professors Fight Deal to Offer Online Degrees, Citing 'Academic Freedom' Concerns](#)." For an example of an obscenity clause, see the Rules for Online Conduct in Purdue University Global's [End User Agreement](#).

3. Educate your colleagues about potential violations of academic freedom.

If the agreement contains problematic provisions, let your colleagues know that they could be signing away their academic freedom by consenting to the Terms of Use or End User agreement and that no faculty should be asked to do so. Remind them that academic freedom should be protected in all higher education classrooms, physical or virtual.

4. Inoculate your colleagues against excuses.

The administration may have or claim to have an indemnity clause shifting responsibility from faculty to the institution in cases where the user agreement is violated by course content. Regardless, no faculty should ever be asked to sign away their academic freedom.

5. Build a committee and create a survey.

Build a committee of colleagues to develop a faculty survey about the impact of the current or proposed contract. Share and discuss your findings in campus forums, one-on-one conversations, or by tabling on campus. For one survey example, see the [AAUP privatization survey](#).

6. Offer faculty proposals.

Using information gathered through one-on-one conversations, the faculty survey, and research, the chapter can develop a set of proposals offering ways to lessen potentially negative impacts of current or future online education contracts. If the institution is still in early planning stages, the chapter can explore, and propose if appropriate, alternatives like the open-source online platforms [Moodle](#), [Canvas](#), and [Sakai](#). These open-source platforms do not require restrictive user agreements or costly tuition-sharing contracts, resulting in more potential for faculty control over course development, curriculum, and quality. In cases where the online offerings are serviced by a for-profit education corporation, proposals can address hiring and instructional costs, faculty intellectual property rights, and academic freedom. For additional guidance on proposals, review numbers seven and eight below and consider contacting the AAUP for model language.

7. Pass a resolution to build power.

Propose resolutions in target departments, schools, the senate, or other faculty bodies in order to raise awareness about your proposals and create an official record of them. Successful resolutions might highlight that the problem is not online teaching but corporate control of online teaching, which undermines the faculty's right and responsibility to decide curricular matters. The AAUP provides model resolution language for chapters and state conferences at this [member-only page](#).

8. Draft a letter of agreement.

The chapter can propose a letter of agreement to the institution to mitigate the negative impacts of the for-profit online education contract. The AAUP provides model letter of agreement language to chapters at this [member-only page](#).

9. Be a watchdog.

Your chapter can monitor all online programs at the institution, paying attention to which programs are expanding and where new pilot programs are cropping up. Provide updates to faculty in chapter meetings, conference calls, one-on-one conversations, and the chapter email listserv.

10. Be a megaphone.

The chapter can speak up about problems that all campus stakeholders experience as a result of the contract. Collect and amplify stories on social media, in chapter and department meetings, in senate and board of trustees meetings, and by encouraging faculty to take the AAUP privatization survey.