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# Academic Freedom in the Classroom





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# What Is Academic Freedom?

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Academic freedom is . . .

. . . the “freedom to teach, both in and outside the classroom, to conduct research and to publish the results of those investigations, and to address any matter of institutional policy or action whether or not as a member of an agency of institutional governance. Professors should also have the freedom to address the larger community with regard to any matter of social, political, economic, or other interest.”

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## Components of Academic Freedom:

- Freedom of research and publication
- Freedom of extramural utterances
- Freedom of intramural utterances
- **Freedom in the classroom**

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## The AAUP's Role

The prevailing definition of academic freedom was jointly formulated by the AAUP and the AAC (now AAC&U) in the 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*.

That statement has been endorsed by more than 240 scholarly and educational organizations.

It is often included verbatim or referenced in faculty handbooks and collective bargaining agreements.



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## Why Is Academic Freedom of Faculty Important?

“[T]here are certain professional functions generally recognized to be indispensable in the life of a civilized community which cannot be performed if the specific manner of their performance is dictated by those who pay for them, and . . . the profession of the scholar and teacher in higher institutions of learning is one of these.” – Arthur Lovejoy

Academic activity will sometimes involve undermining generally accepted beliefs.

Unfettered teaching, learning, research, and other activities cannot be conducted if the faculty member is constrained by having to please the public, donors, legislators, religious authorities, or administrators.

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## What is the Freedom to Teach?

The freedom to teach includes the right of the faculty to

- select the materials,
- determine the approach to the subject,
- make the assignments, and
- assess student academic performance

in teaching activities for which faculty members are individually responsible, without having their decisions subject to the veto of a department chair, dean, or other administrative officer.

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# Threats to Freedom in the Classroom

Individual Attacks

Demands for Balance

Trigger Warnings

Teaching Technologies

Learning Outcomes

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## Recent attacks on freedom in the classroom

- After student complaints, a sociology professor was suspended for showing a documentary about pornography.
- A tenured biology professor was removed midsemester from teaching a course because the grades she assigned struck administrators as too low. Administrators raised the grades.
- An adjunct professor was not reappointed after a student complained about remarks she made in class about those on the political right which, she claimed, were intended to provoke class discussion.
- A tenured education professor was dismissed because her teaching methods involved use of allegedly vulgar language which was deemed “sexual harassment”

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## Demands for Balance

- Calls for faculty to be required to present “both sides” of an issue
- Calls for faculty to be required to offer alternative coursework if students had moral objections to the content of coursework
- Claims that faculty asserting a point of view amounts to “indoctrination” of students

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## Example: Arizona

- In 2006, SB 1331, would have required community colleges and universities to provide alternatives for students when "the course, coursework, learning material, or activity conflicts with the student's beliefs or practices in sex, morality or religion."
- This version passed the Senate Higher Education Committee
- Later amended to narrow the types of "offensive" materials for which faculty need to find alternatives
- The full Senate voted to reject the bill.

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## The AAUP's Position on "Balance"

"Scholars must be free to examine and test, they must also be free to explain and defend their results, and they must be free to do so as much before their students as before their colleagues or the public at large. That is the meaning of 'freedom in the classroom.' To charge that university and college instruction lacks balance when it does more than merely summarize contemporary debates is fundamentally to misconstrue the nature of higher learning, which expects students to engage with the ideas of their professors." -- [Freedom in the Classroom](#)

- Instructors should convey to students the state of knowledge in the relevant field.
- Depending on the discipline, there may well be ideas that cannot responsibly be left out.
- There is no obligation to present ideas that do not have standing in a discipline.
- Instructors should not insist that students accept *as truth* propositions that are in fact professionally contestable.

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## Trigger Warnings

“A current threat to academic freedom in the classroom comes from a demand that teachers provide warnings in advance if assigned material contains anything that might trigger difficult emotional responses for students. This follows from earlier calls not to offend students’ sensibilities by introducing material that challenges their values and beliefs. ”

“The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual. It makes comfort a higher priority than intellectual engagement . . . Although all faculty are affected by potential charges of this kind, non-tenured and contingent faculty are particularly at risk. In this way the demand for trigger warnings creates a repressive, “chilly climate” for critical thinking in the classroom.”

From [On Trigger Warnings](#)



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## Example: Oberlin College

- Oberlin College proposed a policy (since tabled after faculty opposition) that:
- Listed as possible trigger topics “racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism, and other issues of privilege and oppression.”
- Suggested that a novel like Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* might “trigger readers who have experienced racism, colonialism, religious persecution, violence, suicide and more.”
- Cautioned faculty to “[r]emove triggering material when it does not contribute directly to the course learning goals.”

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## AAUP Position on Trigger Warnings

- Institutional requirements or suggestions that faculty use trigger warnings interfere with faculty academic freedom in the choice of course materials and teaching methods.
- Administrative requirements are different from individual faculty decisions about teaching. Faculty may sometimes judge it necessary to alert students to potentially difficult material.
- Relevant policy statement: [On Trigger Warnings](#)

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## Teaching Technologies

- Increasing use of technologies in teaching: online courses, online components or materials in primarily face-to-face classes
- Parameters of what you can do on these platforms can be set by their creators
- Possibility of monitoring of faculty activity within online learning platforms

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## Example: MOOCS

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Paul-Olivier Dehaye @podehaye · Jul 3

Students, please reflect on the fact that a technology company has now effectively replaced your teacher. #MassiveTeaching



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## Example: Learning Management Technologies



“[B]efore we even begin to encounter the software itself, we privilege a mindset that views learning not as a life-affirming adventure but instead as a technological problem, one that requires a "system" to "manage" it. This mindset and its resulting values result in online architectures that prioritize user management, rigidly defined and restricted user roles, automated assessments, and hierarchical, top-down administration.

-- Jim Groom and Brian Lamb, “Reclaiming Innovation, Educause Review, 2014

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## Example: Monitoring Professors through the LMS

“Faculty members at Our Lady of the Lake University recently noticed some newcomers in their courses: administrators and staffers, including their department chairs and program directors.

Without notifying the faculty or asking for permission, professors say, the university has given administrators the ability to add themselves to courses in Blackboard Learn, the university’s learning management system.”

-- Inside Higher Education, March 15, 2016



“I am a tenured professor in the History Department at OU. This course was created with zero input from our department. From the little information I have gleaned from press reports, it fails to meet the basic requirements for a general education course. There are no exams, very little reading, and a total 6-10 pages in writing assignments.”

- Jennifer Davis, University of Oklahoma, 2014

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## The AAUP's Position on Teaching Technologies

- The “classroom” is not simply a physical space, but any location, real or virtual, in which instruction occurs.
- In classrooms of all types the protections of academic freedom and of the faculty's rights to intellectual property in lectures, syllabi, exams, and similar materials are applicable.
- Monitoring of faculty activity—for example, how long they spend grading assignments within an electronic teaching system--should not occur without the explicit and voluntary permission of the instructor involved.



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## Student Use of Technology

- Ubiquity of recording equipment means that classroom lectures and discussions—or decontextualized edited versions—can be widely disseminated

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## Examples

- In Missouri, nonreappointment of an adjunct after a conservative activist circulated heavily edited footage of a labor studies course.
- In Michigan, reassignment of teaching duties of a tenured professor after a student circulated heavily edited footage of a course.

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## The AAUP's Position on Teaching Technologies

- In general, no conditions or restrictions should be imposed on access to and use of electronic-communications technologies more stringent than limits that have been found acceptable for the use of traditional campus channels of communication.”
- While recognizing that in some rare cases a college or university, for reasons of security perhaps, may need to deny faculty members access to such technologies, this report argues that “any restrictions that an institution may need to impose on access and usage must be narrowly defined and clearly and precisely stated in writing.”
- Relevant Policy: [\*Academic Freedom and Electronic Communications\*](#)

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# Limitations on Freedom in the Classroom

Limitations created by the collective

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## Collective Responsibility

- Academic freedom of individual faculty members may be limited by the collective responsibility of the faculty for the institution's curriculum. For example, in many departments, faculty coordinate courses and must come to agreements about course content, syllabi, and examinations.
- Decisions of a faculty body may prevail over the dissenting position of a particular individual member of the faculty.
- 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.

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- Even in such instances, individuals should be able to assign supplementary materials to deal with subjects that they believe are inadequately treated in the required textbook.
  - Instructors have the right to discuss in the classroom what they see as deficiencies in the textbook.
  - These principles apply equally to faculty in the tenure system and those with contingent appointments.
  - Relevant policy statement: [The Freedom to Teach](#)

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## Example: California State University, Fullerton

- University reprimanded a professor who refused to assign a \$180 textbook – written by the department chair -- for his section of a multi-section class and instead assigned a less expensive text
- A faculty appeals panel found he violated the department's rules, but
- The department failed to follow AAUP guidelines in deciding which text to use
- “The lack of a policy or mechanism for considering textbook change, coupled with the fact that the department leadership authored the text, created a situation wherein making a change was likely quite difficult,” the faculty panel said
- Given that both the professor and the department broke the rules, the panel said, it was “unable to reach a conclusion” on whether Bourget's reprimand should stand.

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## What Academic Freedom Is NOT

Academic freedom does not justify:

- fundamental violations of professional ethics
- disciplinary incompetence
- Freedom to teach does **not** permit indoctrination, i.e., to “promulgate as *truth* ideas or opinions which have *not* been tested” (Dewey).



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# Protections for Academic Freedom

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## Tenure and Contingency

- All members of the faculty, tenure-track or contingent, are entitled to academic freedom.
- Even tenure is no guarantee of complete protection
- However, untenured faculty face significantly greater risk when they exercise academic freedom.
- Unlike tenured faculty, who hold continuing appointments, untenured faculty may be denied reappointment.

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## Protections for Academic Freedom

The AAUP believes that tenure is the best protector of academic freedom.

In brief, tenure means that after successful completion of a probationary period, faculty can be dismissed only for adequate cause or and only after a hearing before a faculty committee.

For nontenurable positions or at institutions where a tenure system does not exist, we want to get as many of the elements of academic due process as possible to move the terms of employment of contingent faculty closer and closer to the type of protections offered by tenure

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## On the National Level

- Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure develops and recommends model regulations and policies.
- Committee A continues to examine new issues as they arise and releases statements and reports.
- AAUP staff have compiled resources for faculty whose academic freedom may have been violated.
- For significant alleged violations, the Executive Director can authorize an investigation that may lead to censure.

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## On the Campus and Chapter Level

On campus:

- Collective bargaining agreements and faculty handbooks should include central AAUP policies.
- The *Recommended Institutional Regulations on Academic Freedom and Tenure* are designed to be included verbatim in your handbook.
- Faculty/AAUP chapters can speak out against violations of academic freedom on your campus.
- You can start a chapter at your institution.

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Thank you!

[www.aaup.org](http://www.aaup.org)

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