



# Academic Freedom and Equity

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Academic freedom allows for “invention, scholarship, and creative enterprises that support and enrich humanity. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition” (Franke, n.d.). The connection between academic freedom and equity is fundamental. Without the rights of faculty to speak, research, and pursue diverse ideas, equity is not possible. Academic freedom allows faculty to academically challenge racist ideology and structures in the context of their expertise.

## WHAT IS ACADEMIC FREEDOM?

In its 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) created the standard definition of academic freedom. The statement argues that academic freedom is the “indispensable requisite for unfettered teaching and research in institutions of higher education” (AAUP, 1970). Often academic freedom and freedom of speech are used interchangeably, but they have significant differences:

- Academic freedom involves rights held by educators to engage in academically-recognized expression.
- Free speech is the expression guaranteed to the individual by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

According to historian Joan Scott (2017), “[there is a] difference between academic freedom -- a protection of faculty rights based on disciplinary competence—and freedom of speech—the right to express one’s ideas, however true or false they may be.” Academic freedom protects teachers based on their expertise, inquiry, and critical thinking and acknowledges their authority in these areas based on education and experience. Academic freedom’s purpose is to protect rights within the educational context of teaching, learning, and research. It is based on the “pursuit of truth.”

## WHAT IS PROTECTED UNDER ACADEMIC FREEDOM?

The AAUP statement states that teachers are entitled to freedom in the following areas:

1. in research and publications.
2. in presentations and discussion of subject matter in their classrooms, including textbook selection.
3. from institutional censorship when expressing opinions outside of the institution through extramural speech. These areas are all based on an instructor's "expertise within the field" and extend only to research, discussion, and publications on their identified subject matter.

## ACADEMIC FREEDOM, EQUITY, AND CURRICULUM

One concern that is often expressed by academics is the impact that changing curriculum may have on their rights to academic freedom within the classroom. To best address this concern and assess this perceived impact, one must clearly understand the relationship between academic freedom and curriculum and how that relationship shapes what and how academics teach.

### A Marketplace of Ideas

In order to begin a conversation on equity and academic freedom, one must understand the relationship between the two. Much of the conversation surrounding equity in academia focuses on addressing gaps in student success rates or in the ratio of professors of color in relation to their white counterparts. These conversations are certainly necessary and should be addressed, but their relationship to academic freedom is incidental. According to the AAUP 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, academic freedom entitles teachers to freedom of research and publication, freedom to discuss their subjects in the classroom, and freedom from institutional censorship when writing as citizens. More broadly, the AAUP states that academic freedom "addresses rights within the educational contexts of teaching, learning, and research both in and outside the classroom—for individuals at private as well as at public institutions" (Euben, 2002). The first important element in the AAUP's definition is the understanding that academic freedom is an individual right granted to teachers and students within the context of education. The second point, however, comes closer to identifying the relationship between academic freedom and equity more directly: academic freedom has to do with the expression and teaching of "subjects" or "ideas" within and outside of the classroom. This definition seems to complicate the relationship between academic freedom and equity given that data, which is commonly seen as essential in addressing sociopolitical gaps in student success and faculty ratios, is nearly impossible to collect in relation to "ideas." Nevertheless, equity must be discussed within the realm of "ideas" when in relation to academic freedom.

While scholars may differ on the exact definition or scope of academic freedom, virtually all agree that one of its most important elements lies in the ability to create a space where a free and robust exchange of ideas can occur. This exchange is recognized as essential for students in learning the process of rigorous academic research and analysis. Academic freedom allows for students to be introduced to a diverse range of ideas that often contrast and even compete with each other within an academic framework and invites them to participate in a rigorous analysis and comparison of these ideas as a means of developing their own interpretations. According to the American Association of Colleges and Universities, this "clash of competing ideas is an important catalyst, not only for the expansion of knowledge but also in students'

development of independent critical judgment” (AAC&U, 2006). Students participate and benefit from the “robust exchange of ideas” that academic freedom encourages and that the American Federation of Teachers describes as “essential to a good education.” In fact, this important element is also recognized by the Supreme Court, who in *Keyishian v. Board of Regents of the State Univ. of New York*, 385 U.S. 589 (1967), made the following statement:

The classroom is peculiarly the “marketplace of ideas.” The nation’s future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth “out of a multitude of tongues”, [rather] than through any kind of authoritative selection.

These statements clearly indicate the importance of academic freedom for students; however, they also bring to light the essential role of the individual professor as a member of a faculty in creating and nurturing an academically diverse environment. After all, while students bring in their own experiences and perceptions to the classroom, the responsibility of presenting subjects and ideas within relevant academic theoretical frameworks falls upon the professor. In this way, the professor certainly guides the scope, tone, and direction of a course and becomes the primary receptor through which students engage in these subjects and ideas. Academic freedom plays an important role in that it allows for individual professors, as experts of the subjects they teach, the freedom to shape their courses in ways that allow for those subjects to be viewed and analyzed from different and specific lenses.

Academic freedom encourages the study of subjects not from one particular viewpoint or paradigm but rather from that “multitude of tongues” identified by the Supreme Court. Just as all professors are unique individuals with their own socio-political and cultural views, the ways in which they present their subject matter are also unique. A professor in an art history class, for example, may choose to focus a study on the nineteenth century American art movement, the Hudson River School, through a romantic lens and discuss with students how the collective works reflect humanity’s ability to tame and co-exist harmoniously with nature. Conversely, another professor focusing on the same subject may choose to discuss this very same movement with students but through a post-colonial lens that emphasizes the differences in the depiction of Native-Americans and Anglo-American colonizers and identifies the relationship between these depictions and westward expansionism and manifest destiny. In either case, the subject matter remains the same, but because each professor has the academic freedom to shape curriculum through the use of different theoretical lenses, the focus and discussions related to this subject will differ. Through an analysis of these differences that is driven by scholarly theoretical frameworks, students can then engage these ideas in a process of critical comparison both inside the classroom among their peers and professors as well as on their own. Collectively, these differing interpretations work to give students a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the subject, and, within the context of a classroom environment, allow them to gain that “independent critical judgement” identified by the AAC&U. Here is the “robust exchange of ideas” identified by the Supreme Court as so essential to the future of the nation.

From a Single Story to a Multitude of Tongues

Academic freedom allows for and can encourage a robust exchange of ideas within an academic setting by ensuring that individual professors have the freedom to design their courses around specific theories even when they contrast with other, more traditionally established ones. This point becomes even more important when one considers that the historical foundations of modern academia are built upon Eurocentric and patriarchal theories that erased the contributions of Asian, African, and indigenous American and other societies. Instead, the contributions of European patriarchal society were long presented as “universal” despite the fact that they themselves “emerge from particular cultural traditions,” as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) point out. This exclusive focus on European values and theories certainly created such an inequity of ideas within academia that, by the middle of the twentieth century, it was difficult for non-European perspectives and concepts to emerge. For students, this inequity meant that their own perspectives would be developed through a singular Eurocentric lens that represented societies of color in two-dimensional, colonized, and racialized terms without opposing narratives and theories that would challenge them. Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) describes this situation as “the dangers of the single story,” when one perspective is emphasized to the extent that it presents negative stereotypes as definitive truths.

However, despite this emphasis on traditional Eurocentric perspectives, challenges to these theories began to emerge by the mid-twentieth century. Scholars, protected by their rights of academic freedom, began to develop new critical theories that relied on sociological and class perspectives and functioned to reveal and address relationships of power within society. Only decades later, challenges to Eurocentrism in academia from scholars such as Chinua Achebe, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said helped to establish post-colonial theory, which, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2009), “emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing.” Through the establishment of these critical theories, scholars could now challenge the traditional Eurocentric perspectives that dominated academia and finally present students with rigorous comparative analysis that would allow them to truly understand their society in more complex ways and to engage in discussions of subjects from a multitude of perspectives.

The proliferation of new theories and disciplines by the end of the twentieth century is a testament to the importance of academic freedom in the role of creating a robust exchange of ideas. By asserting their right to academic freedom and using that right to challenge traditional theories, scholars have been able to create a more diverse and robust exchange of ideas that introduces students to that “multitude of tongues” identified by the Supreme Court. The results of this progress are evident in the proliferation of disciplines such as ethnic studies, gender studies, and LGBTQ studies, among others. The existence of these disciplines indicates a more robust “marketplace of ideas” where students learn to analyze subjects from a diverse variety of lenses. Academic freedom has played an essential role in the establishment of critical theories, ensuring that colleges and universities no longer rely on “the single story.”

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