

October 29, 2007

Defining Academic Freedom for 2007

In 1940, the American Association of University Professors adopted a [“Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure,”](#) a document that ever since has been cited in disputes about the rights of professors to freedom of expression and job security. While plenty of colleges over the years have ignored parts of the document, the statement has come to be seen as a definitive statement on such issues as professors’ right to research and teach controversial ideas, the tenure process and more. The 1940 statement has enough history and support behind it that even critics of the AAUP like to cite the statement.

Today, the American Federation of Teachers — which has about 165,000 members in higher education — is issuing [its own statement on academic freedom](#). On most issues, the substance of the statements (as well as [an earlier one from the National Education Association](#)) is similar. All the statements assert that professors do their jobs best with full freedom of thought and expression, and with job security (largely in the form of tenure). All of the statements also say that colleges should be run with shared governance in which professors have a meaningful say in the way institutions are run.

The AFT statement differs from the AAUP’s, however, on a point of policy and in its themes. The AAUP’s 1940 statements defines seven years as the standard amount of time beyond which a faculty member should not work without tenure. The AFT statement has no such limit specified for non-tenured work, and AFT officials said that many of their members who are adjuncts view such a limit as a constraint on their employment, not a protection.

In terms of themes, the AAUP document places the most emphasis on the differences between tenured and non-tenured professors, but with the latter being people on the tenure track. The AFT document is much more focused on the growing ranks of adjunct professors. The AFT statement, not surprisingly, also talks about the importance of having the principles of tenure and academic freedom outlined in collective bargaining contracts. (While the AAUP is a union for some of its members, it is a professional association only for many others.)

While AFT officials said that they didn’t see their document as arguing principles that differ from the AAUP, they said that higher education needed an updated statement. “Times have changed,” said Arthur Hochner, a Temple University professor who led the effort to draft the statement. “Universities are very different places. They are not ivory tower any more.”

Lawrence N. Gold, director of higher education at the AFT, said that the AAUP statement “informs everything we do” and remained a statement of importance. But he said that the AFT document was “uniquely union-like.”

Jonathan Knight, who heads the AAUP division focused on academic freedom, said it was “very welcome” to have the AFT statement, and that he did not view it as competing with the AAUP’s 1940 statement. As to the differing policies on the length of time by which tenure must be offered, Knight said that the AAUP continued to believe that having a defined time protected faculty rights. He said that the AFT’s different stance was “altogether in keeping with the notion that it is a statement issued by one organization, which is focusing on its members and who it thinks are its potential members.”

The AFT statement opens with a quote from Kofi Annan, the former United Nations secretary general, who in 2005 defined academic freedom this way: “the freedom to conduct research, teach, speak, and publish, subject to the norms and standards of scholarly inquiry, without interference or penalty, wherever the search for truth and understanding may lead.”

The document goes on to define different parts of academic freedom.

On teaching, the document says that faculty members, as a collective body, “must have the primacy in designing and approving the curriculum, as well as the methods of instruction, in accordance with accepted professional standards.” In addition, individual faculty members must have “primary responsibility for selecting instructional materials” and “defining course content.”

Professors also must have “full freedom to discuss the subject matter of the course,” even “controversial material relevant to their teaching subjects and methods,” the document says. “Good education ends when instructors have to look over their shoulders to make sure what they say in the classroom meets the approval of people with ideological or commercial agendas — such as politicians, government or the media — rather than consider the professional standards of their peers,” the statement says. “Outside intervention to change classroom readings, or monitor classroom discussions, is to be vigorously resisted.”

Similar principles are suggested for research. “Regardless of how controversial, unconventional or unsettling their subjects, methods and results are, academics need freedom from interference in their research,” the statement says. “They should be able to pursue ideas and knowledge wherever they may lead.” Also, the statement calls for research findings to be open, and not restricted by commercial agreements. “Academic integrity in research,” the statement says, “requires discoveries to be shared and knowledge to be considered primarily as a public good instead of a private possession.”

In a section on the report on “the mechanics of academic freedom,” the AFT identifies three inter-related processes: tenure, peer evaluation, and shared governance. Academics need to judge fellow academics on promotions, curricular priorities, and so forth, and faculty involvement in college management must be meaningful.

The report warns against a number of threats to academic freedom, including “the increasingly vocational focus of higher education,” the “loss of financial support” for higher education, “corporate style management” of colleges and political attacks.

The growing use of adjuncts is viewed as a problem in that they lack the protections of tenure. But the report stresses that faculties and institutions need to go beyond the tenure question to seek protections for those whose positions don’t have a tenure option.

“Under the new conditions of a shrinking tenure track and hostile external interests, however, higher education faculty and instructional staff need more than just a reiteration of basic principles,” the AFT statement argues. “We need to go further in fighting for them. This means not only advocating for an increase in tenured positions, but also fighting for parity pay and benefits for contingent faculty and instructors, achieving more professional treatment for contingent faculty and instructors, and extending peer review, shared governance and due process rights to cover all faculty and instructional staff. Contingent faculty and instructional staff need real academic freedom backstopped by real job protections and real rights.”

To achieve these goals, the AFT calls for several actions:

- More campus discussions and forums about academic freedom and its importance.
- More outreach to the public and policy leaders about why these principles matter.
- An emphasis on negotiating protections for tenure and academic freedom in contracts.
- Political activity, such as the [FACE Campaign](#) (for Faculty and College Excellence), designed to improve the treatment of adjuncts.

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
<http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/10/29/aft>.*

© Copyright 2007 *Inside Higher Ed*