

Today's News

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A Labor Union Plants a Flag for Academic Freedom in an Era of Fewer Tenured Positions

By [JOHN GRAVOIS](#)

One of academe's largest labor unions, the American Federation of Teachers, released today its first comprehensive statement on academic freedom a fresh indication that the worries of today's academics run deeper than salaries and benefits.

The [statement](#), called "Academic Freedom in the 21st-Century College and University," is an attempt to frame the issues of academic freedom for an era when the system of tenure once the bedrock principle of scholarly free exchange is breaking down. According to the union, 70 percent of university instructors work off the tenure track.

Hence, the statement's rhetoric aims to shore up the standing of all university instructors, tenured or not, by emphasizing their status as professionals.

"The basic and really central point is that educators should be making educational decisions," said Arthur Hochner, the main author of the statement and an associate professor of human-resource management at Temple University. "We want our faculty to be treated as professionals and not just as hired hands."

The statement's standards for academic freedom are based heavily on the American Association of University Professors' 1940 [statement](#) on academic freedom and tenure, but its strategies nod to the union's organizing and political strengths.

"We approach [academic freedom] as a union," said Lawrence Gold, director of the union's higher-education division. "As such, we think in terms of organizing as a way to harness the collective power of the faculty."

Specifically, the statement describes academic freedom as a key principle driving one of the union's major campaigns, a national legislative effort to increase the ratio of tenure-track to non-tenure-track positions in America, while also raising the pay of nontenured instructors.

The last few months have been a season of flag-planting for defenders of academic freedom. In September came a statement from the American Association of University Professors, "Freedom in the Classroom." And last week an online petition from a new group, the Ad Hoc Committee to Defend the University, was posted online, asking professors to pledge their resistance to outside interference in tenure decisions.