

Academic Freedom in America: History, Theory and Practice

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I. Theory

Freedom of thought enhances both individuals and society in the unfettered pursuit of new and better ways of conceiving truth.

Socrates–*Apology*: “And if I tell you that no greater good can happen to a man than to discuss human excellence every day and the other matters about which you have heard me arguing and examining myself and others and that an unexamined life is not worth living, then you will believe me less. But that is so, my friends, though it is not easy to persuade you.”

Kant–*What is Enlightenment?*: “Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! [“Dare to be Wise!”—Horace] “Have courage to use your own reason!”—that is the motto of enlightenment.”

Mill–*On Liberty*: “But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race, posterity as well as the existing generation—those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error.”

Dewey–*Individualism, Old and New*: “Constant revision is the work of experimental inquiry. By revision of knowledge and ideas, power to effect transformation is given us. This attitude once incarnated in the individual mind, would find an operative outlet. If dogmas and institutions tremble when a new idea appears, this shiver is nothing to what would happen if the ideas were armed with the means for continuous discovery of new truth and the criticism of old belief.”

II. History in America

- A. The need to protect the rights of teachers to freely express their opinions arose out of intimidation (warnings, sanctions, or firings) from the administrations and trustees of colleges and universities. Disagreements about the primacy of science over religion, the rights of workers to strike, statements against U.S. foreign policy, research unfriendly to a primary benefactor’s interests—to name a few—were all met with various intimidations.¹
- B. The intimidation of teachers led to the development of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) which outlined a way to define academic freedom and provide an organization that would advocate for the protection of teachers against such intimidation.

¹ See Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club*. Ferrar, Straus and Giroux. New York: 2001. Especially chapter 15.

- C. AAUP's 1915 Declaration of Principles states that protection of academic freedom is necessary so that teachers can fulfill their duties to society in three ways: a) "promote inquiry and advance the sum of human knowledge," b) "provide general instruction to students," and c) "develop experts for various branches of public service." Along with protection, the AAUP also outlined certain responsibilities when teaching. Teachers are expected to present ideas fairly and not to "provide students with ready-made conclusions, but to train them to think for themselves, and to provide them access to those materials which they need if they are to think intelligently."

III. Present Practice and Challenges to Academic Freedom

- A. The PCCFF Contract outlines what academic freedom means at PCC in Article 13: "Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of rights of Faculty in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning." While there are various freedoms included in the contract (i.e., freedom as teacher, freedom as employee, and freedom as citizen), there are certain restraints that are expected. One such restraint is stated in 13.2: "When teaching, Faculty are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing the subject, but, while controversy is at the heart of free academic inquiry, Faculty shall not persist in introducing material which has no relation to the subject in their teaching."
- B. So, when does a teacher violate the spirit of restraint included in definitions of academic freedom? Gary Pavela, in an article from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, cites the complementary sharing of academic freedom between teachers and students: "Teachers are entitled and expected to determine which subjects are relevant, how class time will be used, and how well students have performed. It is when such authority is abused—usually to intimidate and silence students who wish to explore or express contrary views—that the 'freedom to learn' is violated."
- C. Recently, an organization led by David Horowitz has advocated for legislation called the Academic Bill of Rights (ABOR) to control teachers and their conduct in the classroom. Some claim that the proposal, under the guise of protection of student rights, would wrest the control of academic freedom away from professional academic associations and give the power of oversight to administrative or legislative authorities. Also, at PCC, an e-mail exchange has raised the question of what is appropriate discussion in the classroom. The exchange was prompted by an article regarding unwarranted political criticism of the Bush Administration in a writing class.

****What are the freedoms and limits that should guide professional teachers?***

****Who should make these decisions and on what grounds?***