



ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

April, 2013

With the endorsement of its Executive Committee, the Association of American Universities (AAU) adopted the following statement.

Academic Principles: A Brief Introduction

For many decades certain core principles have guided the conduct of teaching, research, and scholarship at American universities, as well as the ways in which these institutions are governed. There is ample evidence that these principles have strongly contributed to the quality of American universities. The principles have also made these institutions centers of learning for students and professors from around the world who want to learn, to teach, and to conduct research at institutions where freedom of inquiry is assured.

AAU believes that it is important to record several of these core principles that have been central to the research university enterprise, partly because they are specific to universities and, understandably, not well understood by the general public. This document is not meant as an exhaustive list of academic principles, nor as a detailed analysis of them, but rather as a useful set of definitions and as an introduction to the role these principles play in shaping the university. Our constitutional freedoms frame and support our civil society by protecting freedom of expression. In a similar fashion, these academic principles frame and support the university enterprise, providing space for the creative processes of research, learning, and discourse.

Institutional Autonomy

Institutional autonomy, as defined by the Supreme Court in *Sweezy v. New Hampshire* (1957), is “the right of the university to determine for itself, on academic grounds, who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study.” These essential rights rest on the separation of the university in academic matters and in governance from outside groups, particularly federal or state governments but also industry and other external interest groups. The Supreme Court has further found that “universities occupy a special niche in our constitutional tradition” and that in deference to institutional autonomy, “good faith on the part of a university” should be “presumed absent a showing to the contrary” (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003). These rulings underscore the enduring compact between society and higher education: colleges and universities undertake the education of future citizens and leaders, and society grants these institutions the autonomy to fulfill that mission.

Both public and private universities remain linked to the government through federal financial aid policies, research grants, and state funding of public universities. The links among industry, corporate and philanthropic foundations, and higher education continue to expand. Public institutions, moreover, have an explicit obligation to serve their state, most importantly through the education of the residents of the state but also by providing professional expertise, such as through the agricultural extension services. Institutional autonomy, nevertheless, remains a cornerstone of American higher education and a necessary condition to secure academic freedom. The autonomy of American universities and colleges has allowed a wide diversity of institutional types to develop. That diversity is a great strength for higher education and for the nation.

Academic Freedom

Institutional autonomy allows for the exercise of academic freedom by maintaining the integrity of the learning environment. Academic freedom is the freedom of university faculty to produce and disseminate knowledge through research, teaching, and service, without undue constraint. With this freedom comes academic responsibility: faculty members have a duty to provide their students with the freedom to learn, that is, the freedom to acquire accurate knowledge and to form independent judgments based on that knowledge. As professionals, faculty members are further accountable to their peers and to society at large for the quality and rigor of their scholarly inquiry. Moreover, although the tenure system allows professors to openly pursue their research, teaching, and service activities without fear of summary dismissal, all academic activities must comply with ethical standards.

The Supreme Court has found that “academic freedom thrives... on autonomous decision making by the academy itself,” and that the courts have a “responsibility to safeguard th[is] academic freedom” (*Regents of Univ. of Mich. v. Ewing*, 1985). Like freedom of speech or of the press, academic freedom is “of transcendent value to all of us and not merely to the teachers concerned” (*Keyishian v. Board of Regents of Univ. of State of New York*, 1967). That transcendent value lies in the universities’ pursuit of the common good. Through the production of knowledge, the education of students, and service to society, universities play a vital role in the functioning of our democracy. Freedom of inquiry, exercised through academic freedom and supported by institutional autonomy, underpins that mission.

Shared Governance

The traditional concept of shared governance encompasses the joint efforts of the governing board, administration, and tenured faculty to govern a university internally. The composition of governing bodies varies among institutions; for example, some but not all governing boards include seats for student trustees. However, the division of responsibilities among the board, the administration, and the faculty remains broadly similar across institutions. Led by the president, the administration oversees the operation of the university, making the day-to-day decisions and implementing institutional policies. The faculty holds the primary responsibility for matters related to education and research,

such as setting the curriculum, while fiduciary responsibility and legal authority rest with the board. This shared governance model can also be affected by the relationships between the board and entities outside the university that retain some discretionary power over the institution's governance. An example is a state governor who appoints board members or a system-wide governing board.

While the ultimate legal authority of the university rests with the governing board, the success of shared governance lies in communication and cooperation among the different groups involved. The components of the institution are interdependent. By including multiple constituencies in decision-making processes, the university can ensure that different voices are heard and integrated into a cohesive vision. Shared governance thus provides the mechanisms to support the university's autonomy, enabling the institution to fulfill its educational, research, and service missions.

Further Reading

The reader who wants to learn more about these principles and their origins, and to read detailed analyses of them, should consult the following documents:

[AAUP 1940 Statement on Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#)

[AAUP, ACE, and AGB 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities](#)

[AAC&U Statement on Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility](#)

[AGB Statement on Board Responsibility for Institutional Governance](#)