Academic Freedom

The concept of “free speech” is a broad category that encompasses general rights of expression.

By contrast, “academic freedom” applies specifically to faculty when they are engaged in their professional activities—for example, in classroom settings, research environments, or conveying information relating to their disciplinary knowledge.

Principles of “free speech” and “academic freedom” are both designed to extend protections against punishment for the expression of ideas or because of a speaker’s viewpoint. But the nature of those protections is dramatically different.

Government is constrained from regulating or evaluating the expression of everyday opinion. But colleges and universities engage in extensive regulations and evaluations of faculty opinion when faculty members are engaged in their professional activities.

A person who, in a public park, says that the moon is made of cheese will face no official consequences. But a faculty member in an astronomy department who expresses the same opinion will have those views reviewed by peers, and those peers may conclude that she should be denied tenure because her views do
not demonstrate mastery of the required disciplinary knowledge.

Similarly, while a person on their private Facebook page might face no official consequences if he expresses the view that members of a certain political party are enemies of the country, a faculty member would face consequences if he announced in class that members of a certain political party were not welcome in his classroom.

In short, the rights of expression associated with “academic freedom” are inextricably linked to conformity with the prevailing norms of professional competence and ethical behavior (for example, with respect to scientific integrity).

### Historical Background

The concept of “academic freedom” arose in the twentieth century as American higher education shifted from a focus on religious and moral training to the professional exploration of new knowledge. Nineteen-century campuses expected faculty to conform to the ideas embraced by their owners or boards or ecclesiastical affiliations and would fire faculty who conveyed different ideas (for example, about Darwinism or labor rights). By 1915 a new understanding of the rights of faculty to express views as they saw fit, based on their status as experts, led to the creation of the American Association of University Professors (with John Dewey as its president) and the first declaration of
principles of the concept of academic freedom.

It defined academic freedom as consisting of freedom of research, freedom of teaching, and freedom of extramural utterance and action. But these freedoms were not analogous to first amendment rights, where one should be able to say whatever they want without fear of reprisal. The 1915 declaration defines the freedom to pursue the scholar’s profession according to the standards of that profession:

the liberty of the scholar within the university to set forth his conclusions, be they what they may, is conditioned by their being conclusions gained by a scholar’s method and held in a scholar’s spirit; that is to say, they must be the fruits of competent and patient and sincere inquiry…. It is, in short, not the absolute freedom of utterance of the individual scholar, but the absolute freedom of thought, of inquiry, of discussion and of teaching, of the academic profession, that is asserted by this declaration of principles.

Thus, the rights of academic freedom do not attach to an individual faculty member seeking license to express themselves as they see fit; rather, these are rights attached to members of a profession, where the boundaries are set by peers within a particular discipline or profession.

While the AAUP’s declaration of principles of
academic freedom went through new iterations in 1940 and 1970, the connection to obligations of professional competence and ethics remained.

University of California
Background

In 1934, UC President Robert G. Sproul issued the first statement on academic freedom as Academic Personnel Policy 010. It held for 69 years and in 2003, a revised APM 010 was issued along with a paper entitled “Academic Freedom and the Research University.” APM 010 states in part:

Academic freedom requires that teaching and scholarship be assessed by reference to the professional standards that sustain the University’s pursuit and achievement of knowledge. The substance and nature of these standards properly lie within the expertise and authority of the faculty as a body…. [The] Academic Senate exercise[s] its responsibility in full compliance with applicable standards of professional care.

As long as faculty, in professional settings, are conducting themselves in a manner consistent with professional competence and ethics they are to be protected against any effort to punish them for their views. But academic freedom extends no protections against peer-review evaluation and judgment of
the professional performance of faculty in research and teaching settings.

RESOURCES

American Association of University Professors, original 1915 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure

AAUP 1940 Restatement of Principles of Academic Freedom (with 1970 comments)

UC APM 010: General University Policy Regarding Academic Appointees – Academic Freedom

Robert Post
Robert Post, lecture on academic freedom (video)