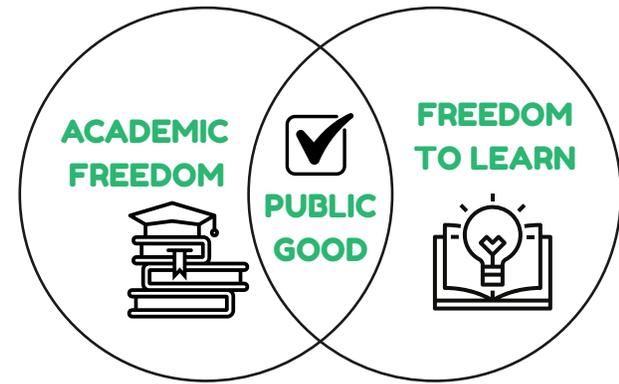


What Is Academic Freedom?

The responsibility of academic freedom empowers faculty to teach on topics within their expertise, engage in cutting-edge research, and participate in discussions about institutional governance without the threat of retaliation or undue interference from administrators or external parties. Faculty members' academic freedom is also a foundation for students' freedom to learn and reflects society's expectation that institutions will contribute significantly to the public good.



The academic freedom of faculty members includes the freedom to express their views (1) on academic matters in the classroom and in the conduct of research, (2) on matters having to do with their institution and its policies, and (3) on issues of public interest generally, and to do so even if their views are in conflict with one or another received wisdom. “ - American Association of University Professors (AAUP)

For more information about the definition of Academic Freedom visit:

<https://www.aaup.org/programs/academic-freedom/faqs-academic-freedom>

What Is The Role Of The Board In Safeguarding Academic Freedom?

Boards play a crucial role in protecting academic freedom, as they are integral members alongside administrators and faculty leaders in the shared governance framework. If the Board does not participate in defending academic freedom, the immediate actions of faculty and administrators could adversely affect the institution's long-term mission advancement.

- Boards should practice good shared governance by allocating authority to faculty over issues of Academic Freedom and encouraging faculty participation in their decision-making responsibilities.

“It is the faculty— not trustees or administrators—who have the experience needed for assessing whether an instance of faculty speech constitutes a breach of a central principle of academic morality, and who have the expertise to form judgments of faculty competence or incompetence.” – AAUP

What Can Boards Do To Promote Academic Freedom?

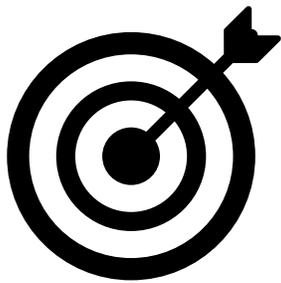
- Boards should constantly revisit campus policies that protect academic freedom on their campus.
 - If not readily available, boards should develop clear guidelines, in conjunction with faculty, for the decision-making process related to academic freedom on campus.
- Boards should remain impartial in the faculty appointment processes, even if they face pushback from donors or the public due to conflicting views.
- Boards should be wary of donor agreements that fund academic programs, research, or other academic activities and allow donor input in such areas.
- Boards must ensure that faculty are subject to discipline only when their speech violates a central principle of academic morality (i.e. plagiarism, deceit)



BOARDS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Why Academic Freedom Is Essential To Good Governance:

Aligns with the Core Mission of Higher Education



At its core, the mission of higher education is the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. Academic freedom is foundational to this mission, allowing educators and students to engage in open dialogue, debate, and discovery. Good governance recognizes this centrality and ensures that policies and actions support the free exchange of ideas, which is essential for any institution of higher learning.

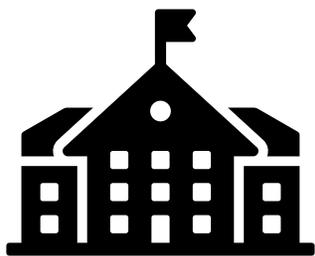
Supports Mission-centric Topics Related to Inclusivity

In today's polarized climate, academic freedom is especially critical in ensuring that discussions about race, equity, and justice can take place. Protecting the freedom to teach and research issues related to topics recently deemed divisive and controversial helps institutions address systemic inequalities. Boards play a key role in ensuring that these conversations are not silenced by external backlash, thus supporting the institution's broader mission to advance knowledge and serve diverse communities.



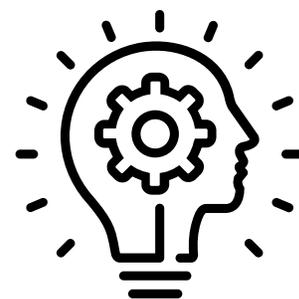
Maintains Institutional Independence

Boards have a responsibility to preserve the autonomy of the institution, ensuring that academic decisions are driven by scholarly priorities rather than external political, social, or economic pressures. Academic freedom allows institutions to operate independently, making decisions in the best interests of students, faculty, and the broader academic mission. Governance that defends this autonomy helps shield the institution from undue influence that might compromise its values or mission.



Promotes Innovation and Institutional Progress

When faculty are free to explore cutting-edge topics, institutions benefit from innovations in teaching, research, and public service. Boards that uphold academic freedom contribute to an environment where faculty can push boundaries and pioneer new fields, enhancing the institution's reputation and relevance. In contrast, governance that restricts academic freedom stifles creativity, which can slow institutional progress and diminish the institution's standing in the academic community.



BOARDS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Why Academic Freedom Is Essential To Good Governance:

Protects the Integrity of Research and Scholarship



Academic freedom is essential for preserving the integrity of research, allowing scholars to pursue truth wherever it leads, even if their findings challenge established norms, government policies, or political ideologies. For boards, this means ensuring that institutional policies support unbiased and rigorous academic work, free from external pressures. By safeguarding this freedom, boards maintain the institution's reputation as a credible and respected educational body.

Fosters a Culture of Accountability

When faculty and students are free to question and critique institutional practices and policies, academic freedom creates a culture of accountability within higher education. For boards, this means embracing constructive criticism and feedback, which can lead to improvements in governance, policy, and institutional priorities. A board that values academic freedom is better positioned to govern ethically and transparently.



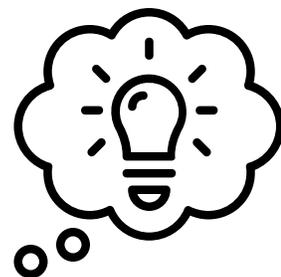
Enhances Institutional Credibility and Trust



Institutions that rigorously defend academic freedom demonstrate a commitment to truth and intellectual integrity, which builds credibility with the public, students, and faculty. Boards that uphold these principles reinforce the institution's role as a trusted place of learning and inquiry. This, in turn, strengthens the institution's ability to attract high-quality faculty, students, and partnerships.

Encourages Diverse Perspectives and Critical Thinking

Academic freedom allows faculty and students to explore, debate, and challenge ideas without fear of censorship or retaliation. This diversity of thought is crucial for intellectual growth and the pursuit of knowledge. In governance, boards must protect these freedoms to ensure that academic inquiry remains independent and that the institution continues to offer a dynamic and thought-provoking education that prepares students for a diverse and rapidly changing world.



A Conversational Guide to Helping Boards Respond to Likely Questions and/or Pushback:

THEY SAY

"Academic freedom is not a matter for governing boards to be concerned with."

THEY SAY

YOU SAY

YOU SAY

"Academic freedom is central to effective governance because it safeguards the institution's ability to pursue knowledge without external pressures. As a board, we are responsible for ensuring that the institution's academic mission is protected, which includes defending the rights of faculty and students to explore and express diverse ideas freely."

Institutional Example in Action

On the 50th anniversary of Stanford's Statement on Academic Freedom, the Board of Trustees reaffirmed its principles and praised the Faculty Senate for adopting the Statement on Freedom of Expression and the Institutional Statements Policy, further strengthening Stanford's enduring commitment to academic freedom.

In a statement, the Board Chair supported the decision noting that, "Stanford remains steadfast in its dedication to academic freedom, which serves as a key foundation for the university's truth-seeking scholarship and impactful research...We are immensely grateful for the Faculty Senate's deliberations earlier this year on this critically important issue, which benefits our entire university community and beyond."

Stanford Board of Trustees, 2024

THEY SAY

"Free speech and academic freedom are not the same thing—a governing board should know the distinction."

YOU SAY

"You are right. Free speech is a constitutional right that applies broadly to all individuals, whereas academic freedom specifically protects the rights of faculty and students to teach, learn, and conduct research without undue interference. As a board, we must ensure both are upheld, but academic freedom has particular relevance to our role in preserving the integrity and autonomy of our institution."

Institutional Example in Action

The Virginia Tech Board of Visitors voted on a resolution on "Freedom of Expression and Inquiry" informed by the work of a task force led by the Vice Provost. The task force was asked to draft a report affirming Virginia Tech's commitments to academic freedom and the constitutional right of free speech. The statement was to establish a coherent and unified expression of the university commitments while also providing recommendations for exercising and demonstrating the commitments in a way that exemplified Virginia Tech's Principles of Community. The report begins by clearly outlining the difference between academic freedom and free speech, noting how each applies in the university context.

Institutional Example in Action (cont'd)

It identifies areas for growth and engagement on campus and is organized based on the areas of impact: Policy, procedures/best practices, and educational opportunities.

The Board “endorsed the Virginia Tech statement committing unequivocally to upholding freedom of speech and academic freedom, and requested periodic updates about decisions on the suggested actions enumerated in the task force report and implementation of proposed policy changes, procedures and best practices, and educational opportunities.”

Virginia Tech Board of Visitors, 2023

THEY SAY

“The board protects the academic freedom of some faculty, but not others. Why?”

“Academic freedom applies differently depending on appointment type. For example, faculty whose role is only to teach at the university have the academic freedom to select, discuss, and design the materials related to their subject matter; however, they should not introduce subjects beyond the scope of their assigned curriculum responsibility. Conversations in the classroom do not need to avoid controversial topics so long as the debate and learning are related to the subject matter.

YOU SAY

Faculty whose role is to teach and do research are hired with the expectation that they will apply for tenure at the institution. Colleges and universities rely on the intellectual freedom of tenured faculty to promote ongoing research and innovation. Therefore, tenured faculty must have the protection of academic freedom to pursue research and innovation without fear of retaliation or political pressure. Academic freedom protects tenured faculty's scholarship, regardless of political climate or trends.”

Institutional Example in Action

In its Academic Freedom policy, the University of California (UC) Board of Regents recognizes the varying degrees of academic freedom. While the policy emphasizes the importance of academic freedom for all faculty, it also acknowledges the different expectations and responsibilities associated with varying faculty appointments. For example, the policy outlines protections for lecturers in the selection and presentation of course materials while also emphasizing the importance of adhering to established curriculum guidelines. For tenured faculty, the policy strongly protects their right to pursue research and publish findings, even if those findings are controversial or unpopular.

If any issues of academic freedom become unclear at the UC, the UC Board of Regents revisits the practical considerations of faculty roles and institutional responsibilities. This is achieved by working with the Academic Senate to ensure that Faculty Codes of Conduct and shared governance processes are transparent, and by establishing clear policy language that allows discussion and interpretation of these principles in specific contexts. As needed, the Board will approve necessary resources and training for faculty and administrators to understand and uphold academic freedom within their respective roles.

University of California System, 2024



[1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure.](#) The 1915 Declaration was the first formal report on the issues of academic freedom and tenure developed by the then-newly-formed American Association of University Professors.

[American Association of Colleges and Universities \(AC&U\) Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility.](#) AAC&U is the leading national association dedicated to advancing the vitality and public standing of liberal education by making quality and equity the foundations for excellence in undergraduate education in service to democracy. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises over 1,200 member institutions—including accredited public and private colleges, community colleges, research universities, and comprehensive universities of every type and size.

[Association of American Colleges \(AAUP\) 1940 Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure.](#) In 1940, following a series of joint conferences begun in 1934, representatives of the American Association of University Professors and of the Association of American Colleges (now the Association of American Colleges and Universities) agreed upon a restatement of principles set forth in the 1925 Conference Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure. This restatement is known to the profession as the 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure.

[American Council on Education Statement on Academic Rights and Responsibilities.](#) The American Council on Education (ACE) is a membership organization that mobilizes the higher education community to shape effective public policy and foster innovative, high-quality practice.

[Academic Freedom Alliance \(AFA\).](#) The Academic Freedom Alliance is an alliance of college and university faculty members who are dedicated to upholding the principle of academic freedom. This principle is central to the mission of our institutions for the pursuit of truth and knowledge. Members from across the political spectrum recognize that an attack on academic freedom anywhere is an attack on academic freedom everywhere.

[Campus Free Speech FAQ. 2023.](#) New guidance from the AAUP and AFT to help members navigate campus free speech and academic freedom in politically charged contexts.

[Center for the Defense of Academic Freedom.](#) The Center for the Defense of Academic Freedom is committed to preserving and expanding conditions that make it possible to work, teach, learn, create, and share knowledge in ways that promote the common good. The Center serves as a resource and knowledge hub for all people—including faculty, students, campus workers, alumni, administrators, trustees, parents, journalists, policymakers, and business leaders—seeking to build a flourishing higher education system, rooted in institutional autonomy, workplace democracy, and freedom from coercion and external interference.

[Foundation for Individual Rights in Education \(FIRE\).](#) The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education's mission is to defend and sustain the individual rights of students and faculty members at America's colleges and universities. These rights include freedom of speech, freedom of association, due process, legal equality, religious liberty, and sanctity of conscience — the essential qualities of liberty.

[Speak Up, Speak Out: Protect the Faculty Voice.](#) An AAUP issue campaign, with supporting material, that was undertaken to enhance academic freedom at public colleges and universities.

BOARDS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Connections To Other CSIG Topics

A Guide to Safeguarding Institutional Autonomy: Actionable Steps for Boards
[More forthcoming as more resources are developed]

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