

University Senate

Proposed: September 15, 2017

Adopted:

RESOLUTION TO APPROVE

THE FACULTY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE REPORT ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

BE IT RESOLVED that the University Senate vote to approve the attached report on academic freedom.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Senate forward this resolution to the Trustees for appropriate action.

Proponent:

Faculty Affairs Committee

**A report to the Senate on Academic Freedom
Robert Pollack and Letty Moss-Salentijn, co-chairs,
Faculty Affairs Committee**

Academic freedom is introduced in the most recent, web-based, Faculty Handbook of Columbia University (columbia.edu/cu/vpaa/handbook/) in the following terms:

The University's commitment to the principle of academic freedom is defined in Section §70a of the University Statutes, which is reprinted as part of Appendix B. That commitment assures officers of the freedom to determine the content of what they teach and the manner in which it is taught and the freedom to choose the subjects of their research and publish the results. It also guarantees that they will not be penalized for expressions of opinion or associations in their private or civic capacity.

The Faculty Handbook then discusses faculty responsibility again, in a section given over to student grievances against faculty:

The University seeks to provide a learning environment that promotes intellectual inquiry and analytical thinking. In pursuit of those goals and the objectives of their courses, faculty may find it necessary to engage their students in discussions about issues that are contentious and emotionally charged, to respond critically to students' reasoning, and to challenge them to reexamine deeply held beliefs. This is an important part of the faculty's responsibility to their students and the educational mission of the University, but it must be done with civility, tolerance, and respect for ideas that differ from their own.

What then is academic freedom here at Columbia, that our Senate Committee is expected to make it our business?

On May 13, 1969 the Trustees established the by-laws of the University Senate. These included the formation of many Senate committees, one of which was called the Committee on Faculty Affairs, Academic Freedom, and Tenure. Parsing this title of our Committee and assuming the designers of it meant no redundancies, we conclude that academic freedom is not entirely a Faculty affair, nor is academic freedom solely an aspect of tenure. In this proposal we hope to define what we understand "academic freedom" to be, and to report our conclusions to the Senate Plenary. With the Senate's approval, this current definition would then be given to the President and the Trustees, and we would hope that they, like the Senate, would reaffirm the intentions of 1969.

We take the meaning of “freedom” from the Declaration of Independence, a foundational document created by a five-person committee that included Robert Livingston of King’s College, which today we know as Columbia. The founders of our country took freedom, like liberty, to be a self-evident first principle, following from the equality of all humankind; for freedom to extend to all, one person’s freedom cannot extend to actions that bring about another person’s gratuitous suffering. But what was self-evident to the framers of the Declaration of Independence is no longer self-evident today. Indeed, it was clear to Alexis de Tocqueville in 1840, when he wrote this about our country, in the second volume of *Democracy in America*.

As social conditions become more equal, the number of persons increases who, although they are neither rich enough nor powerful enough to exercise any great influence over their fellow-creatures, have nevertheless acquired or retained sufficient education and fortune to satisfy their own wants. They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.

Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants, and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.

“Confinement within the solitude of one’s own heart” is a fate none of us would willingly volunteer for. Yet we must acknowledge that this 1840 description of that state as the consequence of American democracy goes quite far toward explaining the changes in government we have experienced since De Tocqueville’s time. We have an obligation to assure that our campus is a place where two or more persons may safely break that solitude and share their deepest beliefs in safety and confidence with each other, however much they may be in disagreement.

The simple proviso that the freedom to disagree must not be taken as a freedom to intimidate the person we are disagreeing with is an extension of the precept of a common humanity. It informs the “academic” part of “academic freedom.” As faculty, we are free to hold and express our own ideas and values, which may agree, or not, with those of our colleagues and students; students are likewise free to express themselves. Academic freedom, however, constrains any one person’s “freedom of expression” in an academic setting, for the sake of the full expression of academic freedom in that setting.

We must be free to disagree with our colleagues and our students, and students must be free to disagree with their classmates and with us. But as members of an academic community, we must all – students, faculty, administrators, staff - voluntarily

accept that these freedoms do not license us to abuse those with whom we disagree. An environment of honest advocacy, openness and mutual respect is precisely what makes the essential work of education and true academic inquiry possible. This agreement to disagree with both humility and sincerity thus defines freedom in an academic setting.

These constraints help ensure that all members of the Columbia community—faculty, administrators, staff and students at all levels—have the freedom to disagree with prevailing wisdom, with one another and, perhaps most importantly, with official policies whether institutional, local, national or global. It is this freedom that empowers each of us to continue to question, experiment, explore and even be wrong—undertakings that support and perhaps even define the academic mission.

We ask the Senate to reaffirm this definition of academic freedom at Columbia University, and to call upon all students and constituencies of the university to accept it as well.