

## Constituency Report Faculty April 2022

The touchstone for the concept of academic freedom is the AAUP's *Declaration of Principles*. Written in 1915 and updated several times since, many of us are familiar with it as the *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom*. It includes the following key passages:

The purpose of this statement is to promote public understanding and support of academic freedom and tenure and agreement upon procedures to ensure them in colleges and universities. Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.

Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning.

At its core, the principle of academic freedom seeks to protect our curiosity from our fear, to shield one part of our nature – our desire to discover and invent – from another part of our nature – the tendency to fear things that are new or different. Our intellectual and creative history includes many ideas, artistic styles, and discoveries that were initially feared, laughed at, or that carried the risk of stigma and even death. Early in his career, Monet was called childish and ridiculed for his blobs of paint. Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for holding that the Earth revolved around the sun.

Between its two parts – freedom of research and freedom of teaching – the principle of academic freedom has always been more complicated when it comes to teaching, in part because freedom of teaching and freedom of expression are largely inseparable. Particularly during periods of social upheaval, the relationship between authority and expression means that any statement about freedom, whatever else it may be, is also a political statement. Ideas about freedom of expression are therefore inseparable from considerations of who has the power to determine what the phrase means and how that meaning is enforced. Neither the AAUP statement nor the more recent *Chicago Principles* are particularly helpful when it comes to navigating these political waters, at guiding universities trying to deal with controversial instruction or speakers. But while the AAUP statement is inadequate in this regard, the *Chicago Principles* are disturbing because they seek to absolve universities of any responsibility to consider issues of power and legitimacy in wrestling with questions about free speech. The *Chicago Principles* include the statement that “it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive”, without considering that such a responsibility may be essential to fulfilling what should be the overarching concern of a university as stated in the AAUP's principles, “the free search for truth and its free expression.”

The absence of the word “truth” in the *Chicago Principles* troubles me, for I don't know how to separate the concept of freedom of expression from some consideration of the truth of that expression. Would a teacher who insists that the world is flat and offers that idea as “truth” have any place in a Virginia Tech classroom? What about a teacher or speaker who believes that the Holocaust never happened, or that women are intellectually inferior to men, or that any race is superior to another? Virginia Tech's conceptualization of academic freedom should embrace these complexities and not set them aside, including the possibility that intellectual and moral progress require accepting certain ideas as established and beyond the reach of reasonable debate.

On the other hand, there are questions that are not and will never be settled, that are so complicated and important and so impacted by changing circumstances that we are required to reconsider them on a regular basis

if they are to have any use. In a democratic society, our efforts to define the word *freedom* in any context must have that living quality, perhaps most of all when it comes to freedom of expression.

The AAUP statement remains Virginia Tech's best foundation for our shared understanding of what academic freedom is and requires. If the time has come to revisit that document, to expand on and clarify it for our times, the Faculty Senate is ready to lead that effort.