

# Academic Freedom and Responsibility

The statement below is an affirmation of our college faculty's commitment to academic freedom and responsibilities. It was drafted by CLAS Faculty Council and CLAS Steering committee members and approved by both bodies.

## Key Points

1. CLAS serves the public good. By adhering to the guiding principles of academic freedom, we ensure the confidence and trust placed in us as educators, scholars, and researchers.
2. Academic freedom is a set of norms and practices that guides faculty in the pursuit of research and teaching, as well as matters of shared governance, and as citizens to serve a democratic society for the common good.
3. Academic freedom includes the freedom to teach, discuss, question, and explore freely according to the standards of our disciplines.
4. Shared governance and tenure are important components to support academic freedom.
5. Students have a right to freedom in learning, including freedom to question and discuss material introduced in a course.

### 1. Academic Freedom in the Interest of the Public Good

The positive public impact of universities over the past century in scientific achievement, public education, civic engagement, and national prosperity cannot be denied. These public goods were only possible due the normalization and protection of the practices of academic freedom.

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) at the University of Florida:

- Successfully educates and graduates approximately 5000 undergraduate and 380 graduate students each year (averages from 2018-2022).
- Finds our graduates entering graduate or professional programs and appearing in every public sector of the economy and society (data from [Career Connections Center](#)).
- Provides innovative and advancing research in service to industries, companies, and organizations. Examples of fields benefiting from CLAS research include: biological and biomedical research, business management, healthcare, engineering, and law.

- Sustains, builds, and maintains relationships with local, national, and international communities, while also providing access to research results and collaborations.
- Advances shared governance within and outside of the college.

As a public, land-grant university, the public good - including educating an informed citizenry and furthering useful knowledge - is essential to the University of Florida's mission. In this respect, UF is in line with how academics have always thought about their calling to education, research, and service. This ability to serve the public good is intrinsically linked to the norms and values of academic freedom<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *In 1915, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) declared: "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."*

Such freedom is essential not only for learning and teaching, but also for the flourishing of a democratic society. In 1957, the Supreme Court agreed in a case dealing with political interference in a university system<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> *"The essentiality of freedom in the community of American universities is almost self-evident. No one should underestimate the vital role in a democracy that is played by those who guide and train our youth. To impose any straitjacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our Nation.... Scholarship cannot flourish in an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. Teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding; otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die." – U.S. Supreme Court, [Sweezy v. New Hampshire](#), 1957*

Faculty today continue to recognize the foundational role academic freedom plays in our society and university. It is encoded in the constitution of UF's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> *"The faculty believes that academic freedom and responsibility are essential to the full development of a university and apply to teaching, research and creativity. Therefore, the faculty must be free to cultivate a spirit of inquiry and scholarly criticism and to examine ideas in an atmosphere of freedom and confidence."*

Academic freedom and responsibility are long-established principles that are vital for the flourishing of the public good, as recognized in our society for over a century. They continue to be essential today.

## 2. What is Academic Freedom?

“Academic freedom” is a set of norms and practices belonging to the academic community to pursue inquiry and teach in accordance with the principles of their profession and without undue interference, in the interest of serving the common good in a democratic society.

There are [four main aspects](#) of academic freedom:



### 3. Academic Freedom in the Classroom

Academic freedom extends to students, who have the **freedom to learn**, to question matters as they are taught, and to contribute to class discussions in a spirit of free inquiry.

Academic freedom is fundamental not only for the protection of the rights of teachers to teach according to the *standards of their professional training*, but also for student learning. Teachers must have the freedom to introduce concepts, facts, and ideas that may challenge student presuppositions and beliefs while at the same time encouraging free discussion, inquiry, and expression, and evaluating students solely on an academic basis. Students’ freedom to learn is also protected through established policies and procedures against prejudice or capricious academic evaluation. At UF, [Student Grievance Procedures](#) through the Ombuds’ office provide such protection.

While most faculty design their own course content, their freedom in teaching is constrained by the collective authority of the faculty, embodied in curriculum committees and course proposal and approval processes that ensure courses are appropriately taught, that their content is beneficial for students, and that the course has been designed by faculty with appropriate expertise.

Teachers are constrained in the classroom by the purpose of the course and their own expertise. Teachers have a responsibility not to persistently introduce material into the course that has no relation to the subject of their teaching. Where appropriate, it is proper and

necessary for teachers to introduce and discuss controversial matters within the subject of their teaching. Without the ability to teach, question, and discuss such matters, growth and learning is absent.

Teachers of higher education have always been aware of the abuses of academic freedom that can result in indoctrination. Building on the words of the philosopher John Dewey, the first AAUP President, the 2007 report on [“Freedom in the Classroom”](#) states that indoctrination occurs “whenever an instructor insists that students accept as truth propositions that are in fact professionally contestable...without allowing students to challenge their validity or advance alternative understandings.” Academic faculty consider indoctrination to be **unacceptable**, and the curriculum oversight and student grievance processes mentioned above are designed to prevent it here at UF. Dewey also pointed out that it is not indoctrination to insist that students learn ideas and methods that are largely uncontested in the field.

#### **4. Shared Governance and Tenure Support Academic Freedom**

- The breadth of fields being studied and taught at UF, and within CLAS, makes it significantly different from a typical commercial entity. The principle of [shared governance](#) acknowledges the role of faculty expertise as teachers and researchers in successfully guiding the university's mission. In particular, the faculty role in shared governance is to set educational policy and standards, determine the curriculum and methods of instruction, evaluate and recruit faculty members in their fields, and participate in the operation of their specific departments and colleges.
- [Tenured appointment](#) was designed and implemented over 80 years ago to act as a fundamental pillar supporting academic freedom. It allows faculty to pursue the search for knowledge and to educate students in a manner that is independent of and not beholden to any special interests. Tenured professors report their teaching, research and service activities annually and are evaluated at the department level along with all other faculty.

#### **Additional Resources:**

- AAUP 1915 [Declaration on Principles of Academic Freedom And Academic Tenure](#)
- AAUP 1940 [Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#)
- AAUP 2007 [Freedom in the Classroom](#)
- [Shared Governance](#), AAUP
- [Tenure](#), AAUP
- University of Florida's [Regulation on Academic Freedom](#), Academic Affairs
- 2021-24 [Collective Bargaining Agreement](#) between the University of Florida Board of Trustees and the United Faculty of Florida, Article 10: Academic Freedom and Responsibility
- Henry Reichman (2021), [Understanding Academic Freedom](#) (Johns Hopkins University Press)
- Jeffrey Sachs (2020), [“No, Professors Are Not Brainwashing Their Students”](#), Medium

Governance Notes:

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CLAS Steering Committee approved document on March 24, 2023

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