

## Statement on Academic Freedom in the Current Crisis

American Association of University Professors, Columbia Chapter  
December 14, 2023

Since October 7th, Columbia University has experienced extraordinary, even unprecedented, challenges to academic freedom and violations of faculty governance. Untenured faculty have been harassed for organizing events squarely within their fields of expertise; a Barnard department that posted scholarly resources in their discipline specific to the Israel-Palestine conflict has seen its website peremptorily scrubbed; the most vulnerable of our colleagues, such as staff and graduate student teachers, have been targeted with new forms of intimidation, being compelled to remove political posters from office doors, or threatened with loss of stipend for legitimate political speech; administrators have denied space for events on the conflict organized by faculty, or have canceled them at the last minute; on-campus and helicopter policing and surveillance by the NYPD have taken place in violation of University rules and norms; donors have sought to influence academic programs and appointments.

Incidents of this sort are being reported to our chapter on a regular basis. All have arisen in the context of discussions of issues that are difficult, contentious, and far from resolved: questions of settler colonialism, violations of international humanitarian law, the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the changing interpretation of old political slogans, the nature of anti-Semitism, and the definition of genocide. But these are precisely the kind of issues a university must provide the space of academic freedom to consider through informed debate. Columbia's own [Rules of University Conduct](#) state:

Like society at large, but even more so, the University has a vital interest in fostering a climate in which nothing is immune from scrutiny.... To be true to these principles, the University cannot and will not rule any subject or form of expression out of order on the ground that it is objectionable, offensive, immoral, or untrue.... [T]he role of the University is not to shield individuals from positions that they find unwelcome. Rather, the University is a place for received wisdom and firmly held views to be tested, and tested again, so that members of the University community can listen, challenge each other, and be challenged in return.

We have not only witnessed a narrowing of the space of free and open inquiry—at a world-class university in the most diverse city in the world—we have also seen assaults on due process and shared faculty governance. When an academic event organized by faculty at Columbia Law School was canceled one hour before starting, the School claimed that the presentation fell under “the ‘special event’ category of the University Events Policy.” But as we noted in our [November 15th letter](#) to the administration, this category was invented weeks earlier by an ad hoc committee that revised long-standing practices without faculty consultation, and is applicable only to student groups.

The Barnard administration also created a brand new [College Campus Events and Approval Policy](#) that places restrictions on faculty, staff, and students assembling

indoors or outdoors. It updated its [Political Activity Policy](#), extending the prohibition beyond electoral politics to include “all written communications that comment on specific actions, statements, or positions taken by public officials or governmental bodies.” Instituted without faculty knowledge or participation, this sanction imposes blanket restrictions and undermines one of the key purposes of academic freedom.

Columbia’s Rules of University Conduct and the guidelines of the University Senate are clear: unilateral administrative action is prohibited. Without substantive consultation, event policies cannot be revised, political activity cannot be redefined, and the NYPD cannot be summoned to campus. The Rules are codified under Chapter 44 of the University statutes, and function as “the constitution for our University.” The Senate is the University’s governing body, and brings together all constituents—faculty, staff, administrators, and students—as stakeholders in our community. To disobey the Rules or bypass Senate prerogatives of governance is to violate the University’s community compact.

The common thread, and threat, connecting all of these events is the failure of Columbia administrators to uphold the basic principles of academic freedom; indeed, on some occasions it has actively violated these principles. The AAUP recently [reasserted](#) the importance of academic freedom at this difficult moment:

The AAUP condemns the climate of intimidation that now attempts to silence people who express unpopular views on the current conflict in the Middle East. College and university leaders have no obligation to speak out on the most controversial issues of the day. Their duty is to protect the academic freedom, free speech, and associational rights of faculty and students to speak on all topics of public or political interest without fear of intimidation, retaliation, or punishment.

Academic freedom is vital to democracy itself, for it is what empowers us to make crucial distinctions between historical events and ideological frames, between political positions and essentialist notions, between facts and feelings. It provides the necessary ground for making the kind of ethical interpretations and decisions crucial to a free society. While hate speech is not to be protected under the umbrella of free speech, in the absence of academic freedom, deciding what constitutes hate speech falls to the often authoritarian will of those who have de facto power.

We call upon all our colleagues in positions of administrative authority—department chairs, institute directors, school deans, central administrators, the provosts and presidents of Columbia and Barnard—to publicly declare:

- 1) A rollback of any policy imposed since October 7 without appropriate faculty consultation, such as the Barnard “Campus Events and Approval Policy” of November 2 and “Political Activity Policy” of November 13;
- 2) A full acceptance of the Senate [recommendations](#) specifically for revisions to the [University Event policy](#) (pp. 25-26) [adopted](#) at the December 8th plenary session of the University Senate.
- 3) A renewed adherence to the Rules of University Conduct that have governed Columbia for the past half-century;

- 4) A reaffirmation of the primacy of shared governance as enshrined in Senate norms;
- 5) A recommitment to AAUP's foundational principles on academic freedom: the freedom "of a teacher or researcher in higher education to investigate and discuss the issues in his or her academic field, and to teach or publish findings without interference from political figures, boards of trustees, donors, or other entities."

Without a public reaffirmation of these core values on the part of Columbia's administrators, we will cease to have a university as we know it. And in December 2023, that cannot count as an unfounded fear.

Signed by the Executive Committee of the Columbia chapter of the American Association of University Professors

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