



COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM
ACADEMIC FREEDOM PRIMER*
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What is academic freedom?

The American Association of University Professors defines academic freedom as "... the freedom of a teacher or researcher in higher education to investigate and discuss the issues in their academic field, and to teach and publish findings without interference from administrators, boards of trustees, political figures, donors, or other entities."

Who is protected by academic freedom?

Academic freedom refers to the rights of "professors and students in research, publications, and teaching, as well as the right to free expression of ideas in extramural contexts without risk of official interference or professional disadvantage." It rests on the idea that knowledge is not stable and that questioning accepted wisdom is essential to the pursuit of truth. Further, the exploration of complex, controversial, or contentious concepts and histories must be protected. Professors have an obligation to demonstrate requisite disciplinary knowledge, but the principle of academic freedom dictates that as long as they fulfill those responsibilities, they should have full latitude to speak, write, and publish free from censorship. Furthermore, the professional competence of faculty in regards to research and teaching is best evaluated by faculty colleagues.

Why does academic freedom matter to me?

American higher education relies on the fundamental value of academic freedom. Academic freedom protects faculty and students from unreasonable constraints on their professional activities. It is a broad doctrine giving faculty and students great leeway in addressing their academic subjects and allowing them to challenge conventional wisdom. Under principles of academic freedom, a faculty member may research any topic. Faculty may raise difficult subjects in a classroom discussion or may produce controversial publications and creative works.

How do I know if I have an academic freedom issue?

Academic freedom issues range from, but are not limited to, retaliation for controversial scholarly activity, limits on scholarly speech, to changes in budget and policy that affect the ability of scholars to carry out the mission of the university.

What if I think I have an academic freedom issue?

If you are concerned about your academic freedom at UC Riverside, we at the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) are here to help you and connect you with resources.

Why Should YOU Be Concerned With Academic Freedom?

- Academic Freedom is a core principle vital to the university mission. The policy on Academic Freedom, outlined in APM 10, states “The principles of academic freedom protect freedom of inquiry and research, freedom of teaching, and freedom of expression and publication.”
- Academic freedom, if protected well, should ensure that your academic work—in teaching and in research—is minimally encumbered by cultural taboo, political expedience, capital investment, bias, or personal animosity.
- Academic freedom, as defined in the policy and relevant case law, protects your right to take risks in research, teaching and service without fear of retribution or retaliation.
- Academic Freedom also comes with responsibilities. Those are described in APM 15, the Faculty Code of Conduct. Academic freedom has limits.
- Both sections can be found in the Campus Academic Manual at <https://ucop.edu/academic-personnel-programs/academic-personnel-policy/index.html>
- Academic Freedom issues are relevant to all disciplines. For example,
 - UC Berkeley denied tenure to Ignacio Chapela, a microbial ecologist, allegedly due to his criticism of the university's ties to the biotech industry (specifically Novartis).
 - In 2005, the Bush administration was accused of censoring government climate scientists, including NASA climatologist James Hansen, who claimed that the administration had tried to prevent him from speaking publicly about the risks of global warming.
 - In 2025 alone, the Trump administration has escalated its attacks on academic freedom. At Columbia University, the federal government has threatened to “begin the process of placing the Middle East, South Asian, and African Studies (MESAAS) department under academic receivership for a minimum of five years” while Harvard University’s tax exempt status has been threatened to be revoked. At UC Riverside, at least three NSF grants and other federal grants have been revoked. Across the UC and CSU systems, over 100 federal grants have been canceled.

Where Can You Turn If You Are Concerned About Academic Freedom?

The Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) is a key resource in the Faculty Senate charged with advocating for your academic freedom, and helping faculty understand their rights and responsibilities. CAF also aims to function as a linkage between faculty who have concerns about potential academic freedom issues, and the administration. CAF is not an adjudicating body, but CAF can help determine if an issue regarding academic freedom should be taken to an adjudicating body, such as privilege and tenure. CAF also makes broader recommendations to the Faculty Senate on issues of academic freedom. You should contact the chair of CAF with any concerns.

Other avenues of support are:

- Faculty First Responders (<https://facultyfirstresponders.com/>)
- UC Riverside Faculty Association (<https://ucrfa.org/>)
- The California Faculty Association (<https://www.calfac.org/>)
- CUCFA (<https://cucfa.org/>)
- The UCR Ombudsman (<https://ombuds.ucr.edu/>)
- FIRE (<https://www.thefire.org/>)
- First Amendment Coalition (<https://firstamendmentcoalition.org/>)