

Proposed Resolution: How Academic Freedom Supports Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

American University Faculty Senate

April 4, 2018

As the politics of our nation polarize citizens, and as divisive rhetoric and actions victimize individuals for their identities and associations, the American University Faculty Senate pledges to the university community our best effort to be part of the solution. We see universities as places where faculty, staff, and students can model the best of human nature.

We are also keenly aware that this university's efforts thus far have been inadequate in supporting all of our students. Further initiatives are needed, and are currently being developed, to provide more mentors from diverse groups, sensitize colleagues to the needs of our campus' communities, cultivate empathy and civility across our community, and reinforce the strengths we all gain from the broadest exposure to the human experience. These goals are fundamental to our mission of preparing students to be productive citizens in an increasingly dynamic global economy and society.

On the eve of the much-anticipated inauguration of our university's new president, we applaud President Burwell's embrace of these challenges as among our most important. The faculty joins our voice with that of the trustees, administration, staff, students, and others in the community to affirm that we can – and will – do better to meet these challenges.

At the same time, increased attention to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion need not come at the expense of academic freedom. In fact, a central purpose of academic freedom is precisely to support diversity, equity, and inclusion. The right to dissent – in a civil and respectful manner – must remain sacrosanct in the classroom.

The Faculty Senate has a clear statement on Freedom of Expression/Academic Freedom: <http://www.american.edu/facultysenate/upload/AU-FACULTY-SENATE-RESOLUTION-ON-FREEDOM-OF-ACADEMIC-EXPRESSION-FINALv3.pdf>. Academic freedom and freedom of expression are central to the academic enterprise, and faculty autonomy in the classroom must accompany these. For that reason, we defend the dual principles of professorial responsibility for syllabi content and professorial obligation to engage students in dialogue about competing ideas.

We understand the concern of students and other community members that more plural voices and broader perspectives should be incorporated in our curricula, and we share that goal. The Faculty Senate believes there are multiple strategies for achieving diversification, including classroom activities and assignments that offer choices for students and value their diverse voices. However, some of the seemingly inclusive strategies may lead unintentionally to the opposite result. For example, dictating syllabi content through majority vote—either of the whole faculty or the student body or some combination—could lead to greater uniformity of content rather than greater pluralism. At the other end of the spectrum, expecting student leaders to vet syllabi concentrates too much power in a small number of hands. Equally dangerous, in our view, would be a system in which syllabi content is dictated by a university's administrators or trustees, no matter how wise and enlightened the individuals might be.

Universities have thrived partly because they have dispersed the rights and duties associated with choosing educational content to highly qualified, individual faculty members, on a course by course basis, with the professional expectation that faculty members will introduce students to multiple schools of thought. For this power-distribution system to work, each faculty member must be granted control of their courses, and their courses only, with light-handed oversight from senior administrators. Indeed, the suspension of academic freedom and faculty autonomy has corresponded with some of history's darkest hours.

We the faculty pledge cooperation with the AU community in embracing efforts to sensitize and fortify us all, together, as one body composed of many strong and diverse groups. In 2016 we approved guidelines for faculty conduct that explicitly affirm this responsibility:

<http://www.american.edu/facultysenate/upload/Expectations-and-Guidelines-for-Faculty-Conduct-at-AU.pdf>.

We look forward to working with AU constituencies to make our campus more inclusive and hence stronger, while protecting academic freedom. Inclusion and academic freedom go hand in hand at institutions of higher learning in free societies aspiring to generate knowledge and wisdom.