



Accreditation and Academic Freedom

An American Association of University Professors – Council for Higher Education Accreditation Advisory Statement

October 2012

The success of American higher education, including the high regard in which it is held worldwide, is explained in good measure by the observance of academic freedom. This freedom is manifested institutionally as colleges and universities seek to conduct their educational missions without inappropriate influence from external centers of power – public and private. It is manifested professionally as faculty seek to test and disseminate knowledge, to instill independence of mind and to engage in debate over institutional and public policies.

The two are often conjoined: A threat to one can threaten the other. In the 1950s, for example, the state imposition of loyalty oaths threatened to blunt both the ability of institutions to select faculty of promise and the ability of faculty to teach in accordance with professional standards. A half-century later, aggressive efforts to legislate “balance” in instruction would have made the courts into arbiters of institutional curricula and classroom instruction. Loyalty oaths were struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in words strongly supportive of academic freedom. No state imposed a test of instructional “balance.” But these episodes emphasize that the consequences of the continuing struggle for institutional autonomy and faculty academic freedom bear directly on the quality of higher education.

Attention necessarily turns to accreditation, which plays a pivotal role in the public assurance of educational quality. To what extent are accrediting organizations alert to the importance of academic freedom? To what extent do their standards give adequate guidance on the subject and capture the significance of institutional decision making and the faculty’s role in that process? To what extent are these standards realized in application, by periodic inspection and, particularly, on occasions when major controversies erupt? Need more be done?

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation and the American Association of University Professors believe it timely and important to address these questions. Timely because the phrase “academic freedom” has become subject to promiscuous usage as, on occasion, institutions and faculty have sought to shelter actions or utterances under that rubric without regard to its meaning. Important because the prospect of threat in today’s highly charged political environment shows no promise of abatement.

The following suggestions are offered about the role of accreditation with regard to academic freedom. They are not prescriptive. Given their historical responsibilities, the drafting organizations are uniquely situated to engage the accrediting community and the broader public in this conversation.

Accrediting organizations, working with institutions and programs, are well-positioned to take the following actions to sustain and enhance the importance and centrality of academic freedom:

- Emphasize the principle of academic freedom in the context of accreditation review, stressing its fundamental meaning and essential value.
- Affirm the role that accreditation plays in the protection and advancement of academic freedom.
- Review current accreditation standards, policies and procedures with regard to academic freedom and assure that institutions and programs accord with high expectations in this vital area.
- At accreditation meetings and workshops, focus on challenges to academic freedom, with particular attention to the current climate and its effect on faculty, institutions and programs.
- Explore developing partnerships among accreditors to concentrate additional attention on academic freedom and further secure the commitment of the entire accreditation community.

For further information, see AAUP's [1940 Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#) and [The Role of Faculty in the Accrediting of Colleges and Universities](#), and CHEA publications [The Condition of Accreditation: U.S. Accreditation in 2011](#) and [The Value of Accreditation](#).

To develop this statement, AAUP and CHEA established an Accreditation and Academic Freedom Committee. Members were Dan Aleshire, Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada; Barbara Brittingham, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges; Judith Eaton, Council for Higher Education Accreditation; Matthew Finkin, University of Illinois; A. Lee Fritschler, George Mason University; Laura Rasar King, Council on Education for Public Health; Anita Levy, American Association of University Professors; Jack E. Rossman, Macalester College; Greg Scholtz, American Association of University Professors; and Joseph Vibert, Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors.

American Association of University Professors

The mission of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) is to advance academic freedom and shared governance, to define fundamental professional values and standards for higher education and to ensure higher education's contribution to the common good. Founded in 1915, the AAUP has helped to shape American higher education by developing the standards and procedures that maintain quality in education and academic freedom in this country's colleges and universities. The AAUP's 1940 [Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#) is the definitive articulation of these principles and practices and is widely accepted throughout the academic community. Our procedures ensuring academic due process remain the model for professional employment practices on campuses throughout the country.

Council for Higher Education Accreditation

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is an institutional membership organization that coordinates institutional and programmatic accreditation in the United States. CHEA is a national advocate and institutional voice for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation. We represent the interests of our members to the federal government on matters of accreditation and academic quality, review and affirm ("recognize") the quality of accrediting organizations and provide a range of membership and other services. CHEA houses the most comprehensive national information on U.S. accreditation available anywhere, including its [Database of Institutions and Programs Accredited by Recognized United States Accrediting Organizations](#). Founded in 1996, approximately 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities are members of CHEA.