

## Academic Freedom: A Primer

College of the Canyons Committee on Academic Freedom (2025)

### ***What is Academic Freedom?***

Academic freedom, as defined by the American Association of University professors (AAUP), is the right of teachers and researchers in higher education to explore, discuss, and teach issues within their academic discipline and publish research findings without interference from administrators, governing boards, political figures, donors, or other outside influences. It also protects faculty members' rights to participate freely in institutional governance, and to speak openly as citizens. This definition upholds and respects educators as professionals in their fields, and safeguards their academic work within the classroom, the institution, and in their research. It also affirms their right to express disagreement with institutional policies, both publicly and privately.

### ***What are the origins of Academic Freedom?***

The idea of academic freedom began in medieval European universities, where teachers wanted independence from church and government control so they could explore and share ideas freely. In the United States, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) was founded in 1915 to protect these values. The AAUP's *1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure* set the first clear guidelines for protecting professors' rights to teach and research without fear of losing their jobs. The *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, written with the Association of American Colleges, became a national standard for colleges and universities. Later, the *1970 Interpretive Comments* explained how the 1940 statement should be applied in modern situations, and the *1994 Statement on the Relationship of Faculty Governance to Academic Freedom* emphasized that faculty should have a role in making academic decisions. These key documents together show how the idea of academic freedom has developed over time to support open inquiry and fair treatment in higher education.

### ***How Does Academic Freedom protect Me in the Classroom?***

Academic Freedom allows instructors to approach their subject-matter as they choose. Instructors have the ability to select materials, shape assignments and design their courses. This is the case even if the content of those courses is complicated or controversial.

In addition to course content and pedagogy, academic freedom also extends to the evaluation of student performance. According to the *AAUP's 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and*

*Tenure*, faculty members have the exclusive right to assign grades based on their professional judgment of a student’s academic performance, free from undue pressure. This protection ensures that grading remains a matter of academic integrity and professional expertise, free from external influence.

Academic freedom protects faculty from external pressures—whether political, administrative, or social—that could otherwise limit what happens in the classroom.

### ***Is Academic Freedom the same as Our First Amendment Right to Free Speech?***

Academic freedom is distinct from the First Amendment right to freedom of speech. Academic freedom specifically protects the conduct, presentation, and discourse of educators and researchers related to their subject matter within the classroom or an academic setting. It also allows educators and researchers to critique their institutions, and the leadership of those institutions regarding policies or practices, without fear of professional repercussions. Importantly, academic freedom affords faculty members greater protection to apply scholarly expertise and engage in academic speech, while also holding them to higher standards. They may be subject to discipline for failing to meet academic or professional norms that do not apply to the general public.

In contrast, the First Amendment protects every person’s right to express themselves without interference or regulation by the government. This includes the freedom to speak or write freely without facing criminal or civil liability. Freedom of speech does not require academic expertise, nor is it limited to those with specialized knowledge. Ultimately, the level of protection given to speech can vary depending on the context and the forum within which it occurs.

### ***What limits Academic Freedom here at COC?***

As faculty working within the California Community College (CCC) system, there are some practical limitations to academic freedom which arise in this context. For example, California Legislative bills, such as [AB 705](#), [1705](#), and [1111](#), all of which dictate how we develop, sequence, and administer certain courses. [Title 5 of the California Code of Regulations](#) and the expansion and enforcement of that Title 5 law by the [California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office \(CCCCO\)](#) also apply to COC. Within the guidelines of CCCCCO, for instance, we must follow the guidebook, Program and Course Approval Handbook (PCAH) which restricts how we develop course outlines of record (COR). Further, we must abide by articulation, accreditation, and local COC agreements or contract language found in the [College of the Canyons Faculty Association \(COCFA\)](#) and [Part-time Faculty United American Federation of Teachers \(AFT\)](#).

***What are some misconceptions of Academic Freedom Protections?***

**Contrary to some popular thought, academic freedom does not permit professors to do whatever they like in their courses. Communication which is not germane to an instructor's field of expertise, or is irrelevant to course content, has no claim to academic freedom protections. Further, academic freedom doesn't protect professional misconduct, for example, making personally damaging or discriminatory comments, or the simple harassment of others.**

***What Does Academic Freedom Imply for Faculty Expression Outside the Classroom?***

While college and university teachers enjoy the same right of freedom of expression outside the classroom as do other citizens, being a member of the academy carries with it certain expectations and duties. These duties are to one's institution, to one's profession, and to our respective disciplines, as related to what is appropriate in the pursuit of intellectual discovery. If a college or university administration objects to a faculty member's extracurricular verbal expression, it cannot constitute grounds for dismissal. A faculty member's unfitness for his or her position must be clearly demonstrated, which must be a decision made by colleagues who consider the faculty member's entire record as a teacher and scholar.

***Why Does Academic Freedom Matter?***

The principle of academic freedom is the basis for an open horizon of discovery in higher education on the part of faculty and students. It is what allows for an unrestricted academic search for understanding and truth, by encouraging robust dialogue within which scholarly voices may be heard and thoughtfully considered. It also allows for every challenging idea to be brought forward in response to such voices. There is a risk that such open investigation may bring discomfort at times and perhaps not a little confusion, but this is the process by which minds are sharpened and by which the ability to think clearly for oneself is developed. Any limit upon academic freedom opens the door to pressures from external entities whose interests may lie outside that scholarly pursuit of truth. Academic freedom provides the environment required to nourish and develop the habits of mind that are essential for a thriving democracy, and that allow students to think for themselves about fundamentally important topics. For these reasons and more, academic freedom is essential to the advancement of the common good for society