

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN SENATE
COMMITTEE ON GENERAL UNIVERSITY POLICY
(Final; Action)

GP.22.04 Guidelines on Departmental Statements

BACKGROUND

The Senate Committee on General University Policy has been discussing the practice of departments, or other university units, issuing statements on a host of campus or public issues, which some might consider “political.” We believe that it is time to develop some clear guidelines for the issuing of such statements – while supporting the right of individual faculty and departments or other units to do so. We ask the Senate to consider and approve these guidelines.

From time to time, events occur, or debates arise, that motivate committed faculty members to want their department to make a public statement on some issue or controversy. The right of faculty as individuals to express such positions is protected by academic freedom. At the same time, however, several states are considering proposals to end tenure or to curtail academic freedom, stemming in part from the impression that universities have become overly “politicized.” The current efforts to limit the teaching of what is misleadingly characterized as “critical race theory” is one example. These challenges make it all the more important that we defend the principle of academic freedom, while also recognizing the need to protect the best interests of the institution.

In an effort to balance both priorities – the protection of both academic freedom and institutional integrity – we propose several guidelines that reduce the risk of departmental or other unit statements on controversial matters being mischaracterized in ways that might harm the unit or the university.

We recommend starting with principles laid out by the American Association of University Professors, which begin with the principle that faculty are entitled to academic freedom, including the right to speak out freely as individuals on matters of public controversy. At the same time, the AAUP’s own standards for [academic freedom](#) say, “Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.” This balance recommended by the AAUP forms the basis of our recommended guidelines.

According to the AAUP, individual faculty members clearly have the right to speak freely when they are representing their own views as individuals. But a department (college, school, or other unit) is by definition an institutional entity. Therefore, when a statement is issued on

behalf of a department or other unit, especially when it is posted on a public university web site, it needs to be clear that the statement does not represent the institution or any other unit.

Moreover, a departmental statement risks silencing or misrepresenting the voices of faculty holding a minority view, as well as staff and students who are members of the department but who may not have had an opportunity to express their views on the statement. Even when there appears to be some consensus on the view expressed, departmental discussions of the issue may have unwittingly coerced vulnerable department members, especially but not only junior faculty who may be hesitant to speak against the perceived majority.

The publication of departmental statements on political issues may also risk creating an unwelcome environment for potential students or others who hold contrasting positions or world views, or even discriminating against them. At times, departmental statements may be viewed as hostile toward members of particular groups. Such risks have consequences not only for the department, but for the wider university. While faculty as citizens have the same rights of free speech as anyone, *as faculty* they have responsibilities toward students and others that need to be weighed when supporting such statements.

Finally, certain matters might be perceived by some as “political” while still falling within a unit's academic scope and mission (e.g., “We are committed to protecting the rights of faculty to teach critical race theory” or “In this department, we teach evolution and climate change as established scientific truths”). Similarly, position statements on matters of internal university policy might also be deemed “political,” even though they are protected under academic freedom (e.g., “We take issue with this position by the Board of Trustees” or “We respect the rights of all members of the campus community, regardless of gender identity”). However, statements on issues characterized by the AAUP as “extramural,” which they define as faculty speaking “as citizens” – namely, issues of broader state, national, or international policy – are more explicitly “political” because they are engaging issues beyond the campus. Statements on such extramural matters can be especially controversial and polarizing.

RECOMMENDATION

The Senate Committee on General University Policy recommends the Senate approve the following.

(1) The faculty of the unit should consider carefully whether or not the statement truly does represent the full membership of the unit (including staff and students). In every case, the “we” needs to be identified in relation to who is actually making the decision to put forth the statement, and who is or is not authorized to speak on behalf of others.

Recommendation: Unit bylaws should clearly set out a process to be followed before issuing any such statements as the position of the unit. This process should follow shared governance principles of consultation and participation, and aim to determine the extent to which the statement does represent the position of unit members.

Recommendation: In order to avoid giving any false impression of unanimity, in many cases it would be better to issue a statement with a list of signatories rather than to issue a statement purporting to represent the entire department or unit. For example, the statement might say, “We, the undersigned, believe X, Y, Z. We are speaking as individuals and are not representing or speaking for our department (unit, etc).”

(2) Units should be mindful that any statement on matters of public controversy might be interpreted by some audiences as an official university position. News coverage or other portrayals of a unit’s statement, or when several units post similar statements, may be taken as representative of the wider institution. Moreover, units should carefully consider the potential impact of their statements on current students, who may feel that their views are not represented; and on some prospective students, who might feel that the university would not be a welcoming place for them. For all these reasons, a statement by a unit as such has serious potential consequences that need to be taken into consideration in how it is formulated and expressed.

Recommendation: In order to prevent any misunderstanding, the unit should always add an explicit disclaimer that its statement or position does not represent the university as a whole. For example, “This departmental (or unit) statement should not be taken as an official position of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.”

(3) It could be detrimental to the well-being of the unit, and of the university as a whole, if units are seen as taking positions gratuitously on a range of state, national, or international policy matters that have no overt relationship with their academic missions. That could easily become a slippery slope, since there are many, many issues (across the political spectrum) about which faculty might have strong opinions. As individuals, they always have a right to express those views; but committing a department or other unit to such positions must meet a higher bar of relevance.

Recommendation: In cases where a unit, as such, is taking a position on what the AAUP calls “extramural” issues it is strongly recommended that such a statement clarify how the position is directly related to the unit’s academic scope and mission.

GENERAL UNIVERSITY POLICY
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