

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 departmental statements – while supporting the right of individual faculty 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 (college, school, or other unit) 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. However, the rights of individual faculty and the rights of departments are not the same in this context. In the past half century, some departments with a strong scholar-activist orientation have viewed departmental statements as part of their mission. In this proposal we formulate recommendations for how faculty in such departments can reconcile their commitment to their scholar-activist missions with their responsibilities as members of institutional units within the University, and the need to respect the academic freedom rights of all members of a department or other academic unit, including those who disagree with them.

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, academic freedom entails the right of individual faculty members 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. Departments, as the Senate Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure points out, do not *as institutional units* have academic freedom. 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, and it needs to be clear how

that statement is directly related to the core academic research and teaching activities of that 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. The Senate Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure calls this, rightly, a potential “chilling effect.” 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 non-tenured faculty who may be hesitant to speak against the perceived majority.

The publication of departmental statements on contentious and controversial issues may also risk creating an unwelcome environment for potential students or others who hold contrasting positions or world views. At times, departmental statements may be viewed as hostile or even discriminatory 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, in their capacity as faculty they have responsibilities toward students and others that need to be weighed when supporting such statements.

Finally, we believe that it is the wrong focus to try to determine if a statement is “political” or not. Certain matters might be perceived by some as “political” while still falling within a unit’s core academic research and teaching activities (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” or “This is how we implement DEI in our policies and curriculum”). Similarly, position statements on matters of internal University policy might also be deemed “political,” even though they are clearly protected under academic freedom (e.g., “We take issue with this decision by the Board of Trustees” or “We want to see the campus make stronger efforts to recruit and enroll students from underrepresented groups”).

However, statements on issues characterized by the AAUP as “extramural,” about which faculty speak “as citizens” – namely, issues of broader state, national, or international policy – can be seen as more explicitly “political” because they are engaging issues beyond the campus. Statements on such extramural matters can be especially controversial and polarizing. Therefore, we need to clarify what kinds of statements are rightly matters of departmental purview (i.e., those falling within a unit’s core academic research and teaching activities, or addressing matters of University policy), versus the expression of opinions on state, national, or international policy matters – where individual faculty may have and express views, but where the department as an institutional entity of the University does not have standing.

Departmental statements should only pertain to *departmental* issues (i.e., issues directly related to the policies and activities of the department). One way to think about this is the difference between statements related to “internal” versus “external” issues. A department is not a voluntary association, and a department, as such, exists apart from the particular

individuals who occupy it at any point in time: their opinions on external matters are not *the department's* opinion.

RECOMMENDATION

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

The *Statutes*, Article IV Section 1, state that “The staff of a department includes persons of all ranks who upon the recommendation of its head or chair are appointed or assigned to it. The faculty of a department shall be as specified in Article II, Section 3a of these *Statutes*.” Therefore, for any statement putatively expressing the views “of the department,” the faculty should consider carefully whether or not the statement truly does represent the full membership of the department (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. Departments must also do everything possible procedurally to avoid coercion, bullying, or what have been deemed as “chilling effects.”

Recommendation 1: Unit bylaws should clearly set out a process to be followed before issuing any such statements expressing the position of the unit. This process should follow shared governance principles of consultation, participation, and open debate, and aim to determine the extent to which the statement does in fact represent the position of unit members.

Recommendation 2: Any faculty member who believes that their academic freedom has been infringed by such a statement has recourse to an appeal filed with the Faculty Advisory Committee or the Senate Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure.

Recommendation 3: In order to avoid giving any false impression of unanimity, in many cases (especially on highly contentious and controversial issues) 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).” It is also recommended that an opportunity be provided for those with a dissenting view to express their dissent within the same forum of dissemination as the majority view.

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

Recommendation 5: A department does not own its website: websites are by definition University property, running off University servers, with the University’s name included in them; and in a larger sense are State of Illinois property. A departmental website’s primary purpose is tied to administrative, recruiting, and admissions matters. Departments should not post on their website, or disseminate through University-affiliated departmental social media sites, statements that are not directly tied to the unit's core academic research and teaching activities or addressing matters of University policy.

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 core academic research and teaching activities or matters of University policy. 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 does not follow from that right.

Recommendation 6: Departments as such should avoid statements on what we call here “external” matters (state, national, or international policy matters) – where the “list of signatories” approach is to be preferred – and should limit departmental statements to positions directly related to the unit’s core academic research and teaching activities or to matters of University policy (which we call here “internal” matters).

GENERAL UNIVERSITY POLICY
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