

November 9th, 2024

Dear Jon Hale, and colleagues on the Faculty Senate Executive Committee:

We, the undersigned members of the Department of Philosophy at UIUC, are writing to express our opposition to ST-83's proposed revision to the portion of the University Statutes governing the academic freedom of faculty in the University of Illinois system. This revision would modify the university system's commitment to protect the academic freedom of University of Illinois faculty, so that this commitment extends only to "the faculty member's area of scholarly expertise"—and not, as in the existing version of the Statutes, to any area of scholarly *interest*.

We oppose this revision for a number of reasons, the most important of which are the following:

First, academic freedom is more than a formal right possessed by faculty members. It serves important institutional purposes by supporting a climate in which knowledge can be produced and disseminated through the constructive development, discussion, and testing of ideas. Because of this, academic freedom has always included—and must continue to include—the freedom to explore and develop new research interests, to collaborate on topics of interest with experts in other fields, and to discuss matters relevant to teaching that lie outside our primary areas of expertise. Hence, according to the AAUP, the academic freedom of faculty members includes “freedom to explore *all* avenues of scholarship, research, and creative expression and to publish the results of such work” and the “freedom to discuss all relevant matters in the classroom.”

Second, and relatedly, the area of a faculty member's scholarly expertise is often hard to define, making this a vague standard with the potential to be unevenly applied or even put to bad use. Many faculty work over time to extend their expertise into new areas, and what constitutes expertise in a given area may not be agreed on even by those who are prominent in a field. Such a slippery standard cannot be made the basis of an official policy, especially concerning a matter as important as this one.

Third, faculty often have important professional reasons to comment on topics in areas where they are informed but do not have expert knowledge or training. In such cases, faculty have the obligation to proceed carefully and open ourselves to expert criticism, and it should be the policy of the university system to protect faculty against influences that would restrict our freedom to do this. This is exactly what is guaranteed by the existing version of the University Statutes, and we are alarmed at the idea that this commitment should be walked back.

We understand that many in the UIUC Senate also oppose this proposal, and we hope that you will convey the department's concerns, in appropriate forums, in order to support our university system's standing commitment to encourage and protect the academic freedom of its faculty.

Signed,

John Schwenkler, Professor of Philosophy
Nir Ben-Moshe, Associate Professor of Philosophy

Shelley Weinberg, Professor of Philosophy

Helga Varden, Professor of Philosophy

Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson, Associate Professor of Philosophy & Political Science

Rob Kar, Professor of Law & Philosophy, Department Head

Noël B. Saenz, Associate Professor of Philosophy

Jochen Bojanowski, Associate Professor of Philosophy

Christopher G. Weaver, Associate Professor of Philosophy