

NOTES ON ST-83 & AAUP POSITIONS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

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EXPERTISE VS. INTEREST

Illinois advertises itself as a place where scholars “make the impossible possible.” This statement is not referring to the layman’s interpretation of the impossible. In saying that University of Illinois experts are invalidating predictions of the impossibility of ways in which bone can be repaired or the means by which environmental stressors changes gene expression, the judgements we care about are those made by *experts*. These sorts of problems lie beyond the borders of expertise.

While experts within a domain of expertise often look beyond what is known to identify interesting new problems that are a stretch of, or even a leap beyond, their own expertise, but this is not always true. Sometimes it takes the fresh eyes of a student or a colleague from another field to look outside of conventions established by experts.

What follows is an examination of a core set of AAUP documents on academic freedom with an eye toward getting advice on the issue of expertise.

THE AAUP ON “EXPERTISE” & “INTEREST”

The AAUP has had little to say about either “expertise” or “interest” as it pertains to academic freedom understood as a privilege held by individual scholars. The term “interest” and its derivatives usually denote the stakes held by an institution, academic division, or individual in an issue. In older AAUP documents, “interest” and is used to denote that an individual or party favors an outcome of research or the content of a course for financial reasons or otherwise scholarly inappropriate reasons.

“Expertise” is used in some of AAUP documents on academic freedom over the last century plus, but it is seldom used to describe a necessary individual property serving as a precondition for protection under the umbrella of academic freedom. Rather, “expertise” is used to describe a community of individuals who are expert

who are entrusted with the definition of professional standards of conduct and laying out the conceptual domain of research that they think likely to

1915 Statement of Principles.

The AAUP's 1915 Statement of Principles¹ uses the term "expertise" to define a community of those whose judgement on scholarly matters is to be respected and do distinguish that community from other groups who either do not have the ability to judge or have motivations other than those scholarly behind their desire to see certain research outcomes. Having experts who are not likely to be swayed by improper influence is crucial to the

the proper fulfillment of the work of the professoriate requires that our universities shall be so free that no fair-minded person shall find any excuse for even a suspicion that the utterances of university teachers are shaped or restricted by the judgment, not of professional scholars, but of inept and possibly not wholly disinterested persons outside of their ranks. The lay public is under no compulsion to accept or to act upon the opinions of the scientific experts whom, though the universities, it employs. But it is highly needful, in the interest of society at large, that what purport to be the conclusions of men trained for, and dedicated to, the quest for truth, shall in fact be the conclusions of such men, and not echoes of the opinions of the lay public, or of the individuals who endow or manage universities.

For experts in academia and those whom academia sends into the public and private sphere to have the capacity and reputation for independent thought and inquiry, their learning, teaching, and the undertaking their scholarly and creative activities need to be insulated from undue influence and coercion:

To the degree that professional scholars, in the formation and promulgation of their opinions, are, or by the character of their tenure appear to be, subject to any motive other than their own scientific conscience and a desire for the respect of their fellow-experts, to that degree the university teaching profession is corrupted; its proper influence upon public opinion is diminished and vitiated; and society at large fails to get from its scholars, in an unadulterated form, the peculiar and necessary service which it is the office of the professional scholar to furnish.

¹Appendix A of *Academic Freedom and Tenure: A Handbook of the American Association of University Professors*, Edited by Louis Joughin, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin. 1967. pp.155 - 176.

In this view, the development of experts is a core purpose of higher education:

The importance of academic freedom is most clearly perceived in the light of the purposes for which universities exist. These are three in number.

- A. To promote inquiry and advance the sum of human knowledge.
- B. To provide general instruction to the students.
- C. To develop experts for various branches of the public service.

Note, however, that experts are an outcome of this process and form the body of those entrusted to build institutions of learning and research that form the community in which experts may develop and thrive. The 1915 statement says nothing about an individual's expertise as a predicate for being sheltered under the principles of academic freedom.

1940 Statement with 1970 commentary.

The AAUP *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*² defines academic freedom as consisting of three parts.

- (1) Teachers are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results, subject to the adequate performance of their other academic duties; but research for pecuniary return should be based upon an understanding with the authorities of the institution.
- (2) Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject. Limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be clearly stated in writing at the time of the appointment.
- (3) College and university teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution. When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. 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.

Note that being an expert in a topic as an individual is not a necessary precondition for being accorded academic freedom protection. The words “expert” and “expertise” do not appear in the document at all.

2003 Statement on The Academic Bill of Rights. The AAUP’s *2003 Statement on The Academic Bill of Rights*³ was drafted in response to legislation that would require perspectival neutrality on the subjects of teaching and research.⁴ This document does include references to “expertise,” but only in reference to the body of scholars who is entrusted with establishing professional standards for teaching and research. In what follows immediately below are all instances in which “expertise” appears in the document.⁵

The first uses “expertise” in the same sense as it is used in the *1915 Statement of Principles*. It refers to a qualified body of individuals who set the recommendations and standards of a field. It does not so much as hint that expertise in a topic is necessary for the protections afforded by the principles of academic freedom.

A fundamental premise of academic freedom is that decisions concerning the quality of scholarship and teaching are to be made by reference to the standards of the academic profession, as interpreted and applied by the community of scholars who are qualified by expertise and training to establish such standards.

The next statement uses “expertise” to emphasize the need to protect scholars from undue outside influence.

Faculty can fulfill this objective only if they possess the authority to guide and instruct students. AAUP policies have long justified this authority by reference to the scholarly expertise and professional training of faculty.

And the last instance of the use of “expertise” in the *2003 Statement on The Academic Bill of Rights* makes it clear that the *Academic Bill of Rights* is undermining of individuals teachers because it precludes them from basing their in-classroom decisions about

The proposed Colorado bill thus transforms decisions that should be grounded in professional competence and expertise into decisions that

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⁵“Expert” appears once and is used to refer to an individual making a scholarly judgement in a classroom context. They are considered an expert, however, by dint of the community in which negotiations and determinations about acceptable curriculum were worked out.

are based upon managerial, mechanical, or, even worse, overtly political criteria. The proposed Colorado bill also facilitates the constant supervision of everyday pedagogic decision making, a supervision that threatens altogether to undercut faculty authority in the classroom. It thus portends incalculable damage to basic principles of academic freedom.

2007 Freedom in the Classroom.

This document⁶ updates and uses “expertise” in a manner consistent with the prior statements on academic freedom.

“Freedom in the classroom” is ultimately connected to freedom of research and publication. Freedom of research and publication is grounded in the exercise of professional expertise. Investigators are held to professional standards so that the modern university can serve as “an intellectual experiment station, where new ideas may germinate and where their fruit, though still distasteful to the community as a whole, may be allowed to ripen until finally, perchance, it may become part of the accepted intellectual food of the nation or of the world.” Academic freedom therefore includes the freedom to publish research results on controversial questions of public policy.

In context, the “exercise of professional expertise” is referring to the establishment of standards in which a teacher may permissibly ground their justifications for their actions in the classroom. This interpretation is substantiated by the following quote that the document uses to illustrate an example of the kind of problems we can expect to arise in the classroom”

Aside from uncertainties as to what is “controversial” and what is “related,” all experienced teachers realize that it is neither possible nor desirable to exclude rigidly all controversial subjects, or all topics upon which the teacher is not an expert. Many things introduced into the classroom— illustrative material or applications, overtones of significance, illuminating *obiter dicta*—may not be in the bond as far as the subject of the course is concerned, but these and kindred techniques may be of the essence of good teaching. Such techniques are readily distinguishable from calculated, overt “propaganda.”⁷

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⁷“Academic Freedom and Tenure: Evansville College,” *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 35 (Spring 1949): 91–92.

It is clear that being an expert in all aspects of a subject is not a precondition for being covered by academic freedom protections under the AAUP recommendations.

2023 Recommended Institutional Regulations on Academic Freedom and Tenure.

This document does not include any version of the term “expert.”