

RIDER UNIVERSITY CHAPTER

American Association of University Professors

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vox facultatis

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Dear Colleagues,

On Wednesday, October 2 you received an email in which the Provost criticized faculty for speaking out against the administration's plan to merge Westminster Choir College into the Lawrenceville campus and for expressing opposition to this plan using language she considers to be uncivil.

Dr. Fredeen admonished faculty who have discussed the administration plan during class, insisting they deliver only disciplinary topics limited to the description in the course catalog, which "does not include commentary about private litigation that is unrelated to coursework, or opinions regarding the transition." To support her position she quotes the 1940 AAUP statement on Academic Freedom.

Faculty 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.

In stopping there, Dr. Fredeen ignores eighty years of commentary the AAUP has published since its original statement. This commentary speaks not only to what is controversial but also to what is relevant.

In 1970 the AAUP clarified the meaning of that statement in a footnote.

The intent of this (the 1940) statement is not to discourage what is 'controversial.' Controversy is at the heart of the free academic inquiry which the entire statement is designed to foster.

Not surprising to teaching faculty, controversy is at the heart of academic inquiry and therefore appropriate to classroom discussion. So, what of relevance?

Provost Fredeen considers any discussion of the transition and the surrounding litigation to be wholly irrelevant, writing, "I know of no course at this institution in which the campus transition relates to the subject matter of the course."

Setting aside the numerous courses in which the relevance of the transition is obvious—which range widely from social psychology to business ethics to nonprofit accounting to arts management—the national AAUP has already addressed the question of relevancy and reached a view exactly opposite that of the provost in its 2007 report titled "Academic Freedom in the Classroom."

The group calling itself Students for Academic Freedom (SAF), for example, has advised students that "your professor should not be making statements . . . about George Bush, if the class is not on contemporary American presidents, presidential administrations or some similar subject." This advice presupposes that the distinction between "relevant" and "irrelevant" material is to be determined strictly by reference to the wording of a course description. Under this view, current events or personages are beyond the pale unless a course is specifically about them. But this interpretation of "relevance" is inconsistent with the nature of higher education, in which "all knowledge can be connected to all other knowledge." Whether material is relevant to a better understanding of a subject cannot be determined merely by looking at a course description.

Further, in its report the AAUP concludes as follows.

How an instructor approaches the material in classroom exposition is, absent breach of professional ethics, a matter of personal style, influenced, as it must be, by the pedagogical goals and classroom dynamics of a particular course, as well as by the larger educational objective of instilling in students the capacity for critical and independent thought.

In the second part of the Provost's argument she makes the claim that "it is our obligation to remain civil with each other while discharging our professional duties." The notion that one may only express oneself in terms that are deemed "civil" is simply an attempt to stifle speech on controversial subjects.

Here we stand with the Supreme Court, which states,

We cannot sanction the view that the Constitution, while solicitous of the cognitive content of individual speech, has little or no regard for that emotive function which, practically speaking, may often be the more important element of the overall message sought to be communicated.

The national AAUP has repeatedly expressed similar views in its policy documents and reports. For example, in its 1994 report "Freedom of Expression and Campus Speech Codes," the AAUP states

Some may seek to defend a distinction between the regulation of the content of speech and the regulation of the manner (or style) of speech. The subcommittee finds this distinction untenable in practice because offensive style or opprobrious phrases may in fact have been chosen precisely for their expressive power.

In Thursday's Campus Transition Update, the Provost makes matters worse by stating an extraordinary position: "The work we are undertaking, and the stakes that it represents, are too important to indulge in disparaging rhetoric that divides instead of unites, distracts instead of informs and hurts instead of heals." Instead of voicing dissent, faculty should act as cheerleaders for the administration's decisions?

We vehemently disagree with the Provost's statements and will defend the right of our members to speak out on any and all matters of concern to the campus community and to take whatever positions their conscience leads them to. We will vigorously oppose any attempt to curtail the

academic freedom of our members in the name of “civility.” And with equal vigor we will defend a definition of relevancy that is expansive and deferential to the judgement of the faculty member.

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