

## Strengthening Academic Freedom by Nurturing Academic Responsibility

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### Abstract

The author reflects on the controversial issue of academic freedom and its tenuous position in today's community college classroom.

When the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) decided to remove the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) from its list of censured colleges (Fogg, 2003; Virginia Community College System, 2003), an opportunity was created for VCCS colleges to examine anew the status of academic freedom.

The 1972 decision to abolish tenure within the VCCS had been viewed by some faculty as a direct and visible attack on the cause of academic freedom, even years after the decision was entrenched in policy (Walzer, 1996). However, other VCCS faculty had perceived the abolition of tenure with less rancor and even indifference, while VCCS administrators considered the ultimate impact of the AAUP censure to be slight (Taylor, 1993).

This historical skirmish on tenure masks a more fundamental failure of both administrative and teaching faculty within the VCCS to perceive how academic freedom is so intimately related to academic responsibility in higher education. Many in academe are quick to decry the apparent demise of academic freedom, but few are willing to affirm the corresponding responsibilities associated with ensuring its defense. The extent to which a right to academic freedom still exists in an era of political sensitivities and the corollary responsibilities of the professorate seeking to exercise such a right are worthy of examination from a historical perspective. More directly, history may provide support for the contention that the very survival of academic freedom is dependant upon a renewed faculty commitment to the nurturance and protection of academic responsibility.

### Freedom and Responsibility

The seminal American document on the subject of academic freedom was the American Association of University Professors' *1915 Report of the Committee on Academic Freedom* (1916). The authors of that document insisted on advancing academic protections so that professors would be free to pursue inquiry and research, to teach, and to speak publicly outside of the classroom. Yet, the report also enjoined faculty to be fair and judicial by ensuring that their own instructional perspective provided students with divergent views. The goal of instruction, according to the AAUP, was to teach students how to think intelligently for themselves, rather than to provide them with answers and "ready-made conclusions" (AAUP, 1916, p. 19).

Even more significant than these expressed obligations of individual collegiate faculty, the AAUP asserted that the profession as a whole had the collective responsibility to ensure that their colleagues lived up to these obligations. This "self-policing" aspect of the AAUP report went beyond a simple appeasement to those who feared the potential abuses of the freedom called for in the document. Notably, the AAUP (1916) saw, *as an oath*, the professional obligation to both defend the academic freedom faculty so deeply desired, as well as assume the collective responsibility to uphold the integrity of instructional practice:

And the existence of this Association, as it seems to your committee, must be construed as a pledge, not only that the profession will earnestly guard those liberties without which it can not rightly render its distinctive and indispensable service to society, but also that it will with equal earnestness seek to maintain such standards of professional character, and of scientific integrity and competency, as shall make it a fit instrument for that service (p. 25).

The AAUP committee was under no illusion about which of the two tasks was the more difficult. The authors suggested that “the profession may prove unworthy of its high calling and unfit to exercise the responsibilities that belong to it” (p. 25). Nonetheless, the AAUP clearly asserted an equal obligation to both academic freedom and responsibility.

### **Implications for Community Colleges**

Metzger (1955) argued that the uniquely American value of neutral inquiry led the AAUP to equate objectivity with competence. Accordingly, the document called for faculty to avoid the presentation of content as conclusive. So great was the societal fear that students would be indoctrinated by the capricious instruction of faculty that the authors suggested a greater obligation of impartiality for faculty teaching first- and second-year students.

During the first two years of undergraduate study, students were thought to be particularly impressionable, and their character was viewed to be ill formed and immature (AAUP, 1916, p. 21). Such a claim, perhaps, would not likely be disputed by many community college educators in modern times! Despite the insistence in the document that the university professor had an academic duty to bring about critical inquiry in such students, instructors were cautioned to do so patiently, considerately, and especially with “pedagogical wisdom” (p. 22).

Today’s community college educators teach in an academic milieu that is set against a political landscape not so vastly different from the one which the AAUP fashioned its influential document on academic freedom. Today’s community college educators proffer instruction within a social context that threatens academic freedom anew. Higher education co-exists in a society where palpable fear is enhanced by news of war and terrorism, and where the media celebrates the polarization of political ideology. These events conspire with a shrill call for greater accountability in higher education to create within the populace a belief that classroom instruction ought to be scrutinized more closely than ever before. That scrutiny threatens free inquiry, and Virginia’s community college educators are in a unique position to rush to its defense by fostering the development of academic responsibility.

### **No Freedom Is Absolute**

A similar view was first advanced by Cowley (1950) over a half century ago. Asserting that no freedom is absolute, he observed that democracies allow virtually unlimited freedom of expression, even to the very enemies of such freedom. The “democratic dilemma,” Cowley argued, requires those of us that value freedom to find ways to allow free expression to continue unabated, while simultaneously guarding against those enemies whose ultimate aim is to destroy liberty (p. 228).

Cowley (1950) argued that the same democratic dilemma applies to academic freedom. Despite the preference of faculty to become a congregation of self-governing scholars, Cowley saw a continuous strain of competing special interest groups in higher education: faculty, alumni, donors, trustees and presidents. Perhaps many of Virginia’s community college educators would concur that an ever-expanding list of special interests threaten the traditional faculty freedoms in the modern classroom – from legislators, philanthropic donors, business leaders, and even student “consumers” of the modern educational industry.

Citing institutional control as the core issue allied with academic freedom, Cowley concluded that the faculty have had to settle for shared systems of academic governance in which an ever-expanding array of interest groups participate (p. 231). Shared governance, in turn, requires a level of academic responsibility for which the professorate needs training. Without such training, faculty may gradually yield control to those special interest groups of the traditional academic freedoms that have long been the domain of the faculty.

The specific training that Cowley (1950) advocated for the professoriate was instruction in the issues of academic freedom. In addition, he called for higher education professionals to promote the general education of the public in the concept of academic freedom, and to emphasize the important role academic freedom plays in sustaining the liberty of a free society. Cowley believed that, “by these means both professorial and public growth in understanding and defending freedom can be furthered without interfering with each professor’s growth in his specialty” (p. 233). Cowley predicted that, “Eventually – and it may be soon – we will see the folly of slighting the general education of college students and then having to spend great energy, if not huge sums of money, to win their support for academic freedom after they have graduated” (p. 236).

### **A Modern Defense**

Some of the resiliency of modern attacks on academic freedom may partially originate from the failure of the

professorate to defend themselves against breaches of the public trust caused by incompetent colleagues who lack the professional character and scientific integrity called for in the seminal document of the AAUP.

This viewpoint looms from the more recent literature on academic freedom. In 1970, Hechinger pointed out that modern attacks on academic freedom have come from groups and individuals from both sides of the political spectrum, who employ such tactics such as character assassination, violence, and disruption of public presentations. The major concern he expressed was that many intellectuals fail to recognize threats to academic freedom that originate from people who share their own political viewpoint.

For example, in a discussion of the opposition faced by faculty members who have publicly assigned blame for the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> to the actions of the American government, Kurtz (2001) argued that “we ourselves must shoulder a good deal of responsibility” for recent assaults on academic freedom (p. B24). His argument cited the rise of speech codes in which he claimed, “sensitivity trumped free speech” to create a campus climate that fails to encourage a clash of views. “Students,” he wrote, “and the public at large, no longer believe that the academy is capable of providing the country with a balanced assessment of our national dilemma” (p. B24).

Whoever is to blame for our current state of affairs, there is little doubt that academic freedom is currently under siege. Close to a century after the AAUP was created, an authoritative source to appeal to for the defense of academic freedom has still not been identified. Just as was the case at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, academicians have now re-discovered that the courts and the government provide insufficient refuge against the assault.

The original authors of the seminal AAUP committee report recognized that the public trust was the last vestige of hope for establishing the moral authority necessary to preserve academic freedom. The authors also perceived that trust could not be established and preserved without the profession equally defending against breaches of that trust. Without a vigorous renewal on the part of today’s faculty of that original pledge to equally uphold the integrity of instructional practice, the public will continue to ignore appeals to assist the Academy in the defense of this vital freedom.

### **Within the VCCS**

Few grand strategies exist for VCCS educators to use to address this dilemma, except to reassert Cowley’s (1950) suggestion that a vigorous defense of academic freedom begins with professional development in the principles and limits of that freedom.

The professional development program developed and promoted by the VCCS is well organized and well respected. By employing the power of the professional development resources available within the system, a renewed emphasis on a discussion of the status of academic freedom in VCCS peer group meetings would be beneficial.

Furthermore, the assertion by Cowley that public support for academic freedom begins with attending to the general education of college students is worthy of consideration within the VCCS and all of higher education. As the VCCS struggles to debate and assess what constitutes a collegiate-level general education, instruction in the concept and value of academic freedom ought to be included.

Finally, college academic committees within the VCCS ought to initiate collegial faculty discussions on the rights and responsibilities associated with academic freedom. To disregard either faculty or student instruction in both the rights and responsibilities associated with academic freedom places the value of that freedom we hold so dear in great peril.

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