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Responses to the AAC&U Statement

By David A. Hollinger, Anne D. Neal, and
Bruce Robbins

Following are three solicited responses to the AAC&U Statement on Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility. Readers are strongly encouraged to contribute additional responses online at <http://www.aacu-edu.org/liberaleducation/index.cfm>, where they will be published as they are received.

A Response from David A. Hollinger

Academic freedom is an institutionally specific type of liberty. It gains its character from the rules of evidence and reasoning used by communities of scientists and scholars to determine the relative value of truth-claims. One of the finest virtues of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Statement on Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility is that it articulates this basic insight so clearly. AAC&U insists upon the responsibility of educational institutions to defend academic professionalism and to make its methods of thought available to students.

Too often, academic freedom is conflated with free speech. This closely allied ideal transcends colleges and universities, and for all its glory does not speak directly to the particular role of institutions designed for the advancement and dissemination of knowledge. Happily, the defense of academic freedom offered by AAC&U reminds its readers repeatedly that colleges and universities are obliged by the idea of academic freedom not to support the uncritical expression of any and all ideas, but to promote the *critical evaluation* of such ideas and to *resist the pressure to treat as valid ideas discredited by the rules of evidence and reasoning*.

Perhaps the AAC&U statement can help more of the public understand the structure of cognitive authority by which institutions of higher learning properly operate. This structure of cognitive authority is imperfectly understood by many of academia's critics, yet it is the foundation for "peer review" throughout the learned world. This structure of cognitive authority can be envisaged as a series

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of concentric circles of accountability. In order to maintain its standing in the learned world as a whole, any particular disciplinary or subdisciplinary community must keep the communities nearest to it persuaded that it is behaving responsibly. It must also, partly by being able to point to the support of these neighboring communities, diminish whatever skepticism about its operations might arise in more distant parts of the learned world and beyond, in the society that scientists and scholars do, after all, serve.

So the structure of cognitive authority moves out from particle physics to physics to natural science to science to the learned world as a whole, and then to the most informed members of the public. The farther you get from the technical particulars of the field, the less authority you have to decide what should be going on; but, in a democratic society, there is some authority distributed all the way out. It is the job of deans and provosts to keep abreast of these transdisciplinary conversations, and to pressure particular departments and schools to change their way of doing things—to achieve, indeed, balance—if the parts of the learned world most qualified to judge are truly dubious about their research programs and their attendant teaching and public service activities.

This informal structure of cognitive authority has been illuminated by my late Berkeley colleague Bernard Williams in *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, the book he published shortly before his death. Williams reminds us that the entry fee into a learned discourse includes extensive and rigorous training, and earning of the attention of one's professional peers through the acceptance, in argumentation, of certain forms of reasoning and certain kinds of evidence. Cranks can and must be filtered out. "The orderly management of scientific inquiry," Williams declares, "implies that the vast majority of suggestions which an uninformed person might mistake for a contribution" will quite properly be brushed aside. "Very rarely the cranky view turns out to be right, and then the scientists who ignored it are attacked for dogmatism and prejudice," but "they can rightly reply, there was no way of telling in advance that this particular cranky idea was to be taken seriously," and that if every such idea were allowed to command the attention of investigators very little progress in inquiry could be made. In a conclusion that might apply to a great range of the controversies between academics and their nonacademic critics over whether this or that academic enterprise is balanced, Williams generalizes as follows: "People cannot come in from outside, speak when they feel like it, make endless, irrelevant, or insulting interventions, and so on; they cannot invoke a right to do so, and no one thinks that things would go better in the direction of truth if they could" (2002, 217).

Finally, I want to observe that the emphases in the AAC&U statement are fully consistent with those favored by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). I want to call attention to a highly salient theoretical treatise recently written by Robert Post (2006), a member of the AAUP Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure. This essay, "The Structure of Academic Freedom," provides additional, well-argued support for the position wisely taken by AAC&U.

A Response from Anne D. Neal

Nearly twenty years ago, Yale University president Benno Schmidt (1991)

observed that “the most serious problems of freedom of expression in our society today exist on our campuses.” It has taken a long time for the higher education community to face this fact. It is easy to perceive, and even to exaggerate, threats from the outside. It is much easier to minimize, and even to deny, threats from within.

The statement organized by the American Council on Education and endorsed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) on June 23, 2005, is a step, albeit ambiguous, in the direction of facing facts. The AAC&U Statement on Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility goes even further in that direction and may, in fact, lay the groundwork for what is *really needed*—action to correct the situation.

The problem consists of several elements, alluded to but not explored or acknowledged by the AAC&U statement. The first is the documented one-sided character of top university faculties in the “value-bearing” disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. The second is the widespread influence of the postmodern view that debunks the traditional premises for academic freedom and liberal education based on the search for truth and reasoned debate. The third is the power on campus of those who believe in the suppression of “politically incorrect” thought and speech. These are widespread, well-known phenomena—documented not only by their critics but often acknowledged and even advocated in print by their proponents.

Added to this is substantial evidence of a politicized classroom. In late 2004, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni commissioned the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut to conduct a scientific survey of undergraduates in the top fifty national research and liberal arts colleges and universities listed by *US News & World Report*. What did we find? A shocking 49 percent of the students said their professors *frequently* injected political comments into their courses, even if they had nothing to do with the subject—in direct violation of the 1940 American Association of University Professors Statement on Academic Freedom, the acknowledged touchstone of academic rights and responsibilities.

Imagine if 49 percent of professors spent class time advocating their own religion. What if 49 percent of women said that their professors injected sexually suggestive remarks in class? Or African American students reported racial insults in the classroom? Higher education would take immediate action. Political harassment and viewpoint discrimination merit a similar response.

To its credit, the AAC&U statement reaffirms the classic expressions of academic freedom and the fundamental First Amendment principle that “unwelcome views need to be heard rather than silenced.” It articulates an understanding of liberal education and academic freedom based on reasoned debate and the search for truth “unconstrained by political, religious, or other dictums.” It emphasizes the responsibilities, and not just the rights, of professors. It strongly endorses “students’ freedom to form independent judgments”—which is quite different from those who would mould students into “change agents” for a prescribed social agenda. It celebrates the diversity of views and explains why “the clash of competing ideas is an important catalyst . . . in students’ development of

independent critical judgment.” It underscores the importance of grading on “merit . . . uninfluenced by the personal views of professors.”

In its own muted way, the statement acknowledges that higher education falls short of these ideals. “In reality, practice often”—*often!*—“falls short of these norms.” It gives specifics: “Some departments fail to ensure that their curricula include the full diversity of legitimate intellectual perspectives appropriate to their disciplines. And individual faculty members sometimes express their personal views to students in ways that intimidate them.” It concludes with what may well be a (very faint) call for action: “There are institutional means for dealing with these matters, and in all of these areas, there is room for improvement.”

All this is positive, and we hope that it will lead to action. After Harvard president Lawrence Summers made the impolitic observation that researchers might explore whether biological factors affect the propensity of women to go into math and science, it took only a matter of weeks for Harvard to appoint a diversity dean and to appropriate millions of dollars toward women and science. Why not do the same when it comes to intellectual diversity?

Our report *Intellectual Diversity: Time for Action* (available online at <http://www.goacta.org/flashindex.html>) suggests a wide range of positive steps the higher education community might take—such as conducting a self-study on the current state of intellectual diversity on campus; incorporating intellectual diversity into institutional statements; and encouraging balanced panels and speaker series. We hope that, a year from now, colleges and universities will be able to report concrete actions they are taking to ensure that students enjoy the “free marketplace of ideas.”

A Response from Bruce Robbins

I admire both the spirit and the letter of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Statement on Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility. The main thing I’d like to add is a reflection on the rhetorical situation that calls forth such statements. I wonder whether the struggle for the defense of the university doesn’t demand other sorts of strategy as well.

In the face of persistent attacks from without, attacks that make up in financial resources and political connections for whatever they may lack in reliable information—the example that comes to mind at my university is the David Project’s baseless but skillfully publicized assault on faculty critics of Israel—academics and administrators who themselves hold diverse political views have banded together, faithfully if not always swiftly, to reaffirm the concept of academic freedom. This line of self-defense has the advantage of inspiring a certain respect among the educated public. In practice, however, it has not always stood up well to waves of patriotic hysteria like McCarthyism. And it has several disadvantages that it’s just as well to be clear about.

One disadvantage concerns the frequent confusion between academic freedom and freedom of speech. Freedom of speech is a universal right, available to non-academics as well. Academic freedom is not: it gives academics a great deal of authority to control speech within their domain without interference from outside it. In clarifying this *confusion* while also asking the general public to support

academic freedom, the AAC&U statement is asking the general public to support a right, an authority, for which many will have no real equivalent in their own working lives. Supporters of academic freedom do not always seem to realize how forbidding a rhetorical and political challenge this represents.

In the effort to explain the benefits of academic freedom not to ourselves, but to the rest of society, the best we seem to have come up with thus far is the teaching of “independent critical judgment.” Like the administrative abstraction “excellence,” this has an innocent minimalism that bears looking into.

To help students think critically about a subject or problem, faculty members need to take seriously what students already know or believe about the topic and engage that prior understanding so that new learning modifies the old—complicating, correcting, and expanding it. The process of cultivating a liberal education is a journey that transforms the minds and hearts, and frequently the starting assumptions, of those involved.

Or does the statement suggest that these “starting assumptions” are not “frequently” but *always* wrong? The underlying belief here is betrayed in the metaphor that follows: “Just as a crustacean breaks its confining shell in order to grow, so students may have to jettison narrow concepts as they expand their knowledge.” The crustacean’s shell *has* to be destroyed. Thus the implication is not that the “initial concepts” or student beliefs *may* have to be jettisoned, but that they *must* be jettisoned. Here academic knowledge is quietly claiming a lot for itself. I admit I myself am energized by being told that I do nothing less heroic than this. But I’m not sure it will work as well on outsiders.

I like the (Hegelian) story according to which students start by seeing things in black and white, then react to the onslaught of academic knowledge by fleeing to the opposite position that any idea is as good as any other, and then if all goes well end up realizing that, now that they can evaluate arguments and evidence, some views are really better than others. But if we academics continue to be quite so neutral as to what these better (stage 3) views are, non-academics are likely to continue to think that what we’re really teaching is (stage 2) that any idea is as good as any other.

“It is inevitable,” the statement says, “that students will encounter ideas, books, and people that challenge their preconceived ideas and beliefs.” This is true to my experience, and in the present context it needs to be said and said again. But how much further down this road do we want to go? Are we ready to define the knowledge we produce as a challenge to all “preconceived ideas and beliefs”? Is our self-appointed task to supersede any ideas and beliefs that have already been conceived, and simply because of their prior conception, the fact that they exist? The risk is a seeming worship of intellectual novelty for its own sake, at the expense of any principles (for example, principles of democracy) that would help us flesh out the goals of our scholarship and make them visible as goals an outsider too can appreciate.

Outsiders are perhaps a bit undervalued in the statement. “A discipline,” it says, “consists of a specialized community that, through intense collective effort, has

formulated reliable methods for determining whether any particular claim meets accepted criteria for truth. But assertions from any single disciplinary community as to ‘what is the case’ are themselves necessarily partial and bounded because other disciplinary communities can and do provide other perspectives.” This final “because” ought to be replaced by something like “if for no other reason than the fact that.” The statement’s phrasing makes it sound as if, were it not for the existence of other disciplines, each discipline would be completely reliable. It’s as if each discipline had to agree with itself, to be unanimous in its judgment, in order to support professional opinion against non-professional opinion, so that dissent could only come from *other* disciplines. This misstates the way disciplines work as zones of disagreement—*controlled* disagreement, disagreement within limits that insiders can sense if not necessarily point to or describe.

Conflict is arguably at the discipline’s very heart, and yet it is always reaching outside the discipline. However inconvenient interference may sometimes seem, the “outside” is intrinsic to academic work. For example, it would be unfair to psychology to imagine that psychologists themselves have nothing to say to a layman’s concern about how far certain issues should and should not be medicalized, to what extent a certain sort of conduct is properly seen as a “disease” rather than (like most conduct) an inscrutable mixture of nature and nurture, free will and social determination. A healthy discipline (so to speak) is always addressing at least some of the objections that might be raised by those outside the discipline. I’m sure there are economists who are asking, when they model a given corporate strategy, how the costs to the environment and the costs to future generations might be factored in as real economic costs rather than being left to the environmentalists. Disciplines could not function without respect for the views of “outsiders,” whether from other disciplines or not.

“Academic freedom” means circling the wagons. In the larger struggle over the university to which the recent attacks belong, we may need to be more enterprising, even to go on the offensive. This will entail recognizing, threatening as the recognition may be in terms of self-defense, that the line between the academy’s inside and outside has never been as tight and defensible as we sometimes pretend.

David A. Hollinger, the Preston Hotchkis Professor of History at the University of California– Berkeley, is the chair of the American Association of University Professors Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure. **Anne D. Neal** is president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. **Bruce Robbins** is professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University.

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AAC&U

1818 R Street NW, Washington, DC 20009

202/387-3760

202/265-9532 Fax

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