

**The Carolina Commitment to Academic Freedom and Free Expression
Written by the Committee for Academic Freedom and Free Expression (CAFFE) at
the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. This committee was created and
charged by Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz on January 30, 2023. This report was
revised on February 21, 2024.**

Academic Freedom and Free Expression are foundational principles for both research universities and democratic societies. These principles are essential for academic institutions because they protect the free pursuit of knowledge and open exchange of ideas, while promoting civic discourse. As the nation's first public university, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) has a special obligation to promote and defend these principles. UNC best achieves its mission of advancing knowledge, preparing students to participate in a democratic society, and serving the people of North Carolina when it ensures that ideas may be openly debated. Free expression ensures that different viewpoints can be heard and tested both within the university and beyond.

Robust adherence to the principles of academic freedom and free expression nurtures a healthy spirit of debate and dialogue among students and faculty. In practice, however, these principles can be jeopardized when people see alternative viewpoints as endangering their own views, identities, or communities. This statement therefore articulates the rights and responsibilities of faculty associated with academic freedom and free expression at UNC.

Where faculty and students once faced dismissal for voicing unpopular ideas or pursuing research that might challenge reigning ideas, universities now embrace the principle of academic freedom for all tenured and non-tenured faculty and instructors to research, discuss, and teach controversial subjects free from internal or external constraints. Recognizing that free inquiry and debate are fundamental institutional values, universities have established academic tenure and other institutional processes for evaluating the quality of their faculty's academic scholarship, teaching, and public service. As a public, state-supported institution, UNC has a special mission to uphold the highest standards of academic freedom, a principle captured in its motto, *Lux Libertas*. The commitment to "Light and liberty" signifies a dual endeavor: the steadfast pursuit of truth and knowledge, coupled with the liberty to engage in such a quest, wherever it may lead.

Academic freedom within the university differs from free expression and the constitutional right of free speech, in that faculty are expected to speak accurately about knowledge and provide evidence-based information or interpretations in classrooms or scholarly debates. Free expression outside classrooms, scholarly discussions, or academic departments does not necessarily follow the same constraints. Academic freedom and free expression may therefore differ, yet they are also connected; and all members of the University community benefit from the exercise of these essential freedoms.

The principles of academic freedom and free expression are described in UNC's mission statement, the UNC Board of Governor's Faculty Code, the UNC Faculty Council's Resolution on Academic Freedom, and the multiple statements published by the American Association of University Professors.ⁱ The Committee on Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression endorses these statements about the purpose and the critical importance of academic freedom and free expression. At the same time, the Committee recognizes the real-world challenges that arise in protecting and promoting these values within the University's classrooms, debates, and public events. In times of controversy and polarization, these principles require reaffirmation to ensure that UNC can fulfill its public mission. We therefore commit to the following specific

faculty rights and responsibilities, which flow from these foundational principles and remain subject to applicable law and University policy.

Faculty Rights and Responsibilities

- **Rights:**

- **Freedom of Inquiry and Research:** Faculty members have the freedom to pursue research and scholarly inquiry subject to general rules of academic integrity without internal or external interference that would unreasonably restrict academic endeavors. They have the freedom to publish their findings, even if such findings challenge prevailing institutional or societal beliefs.
- **Freedom of Teaching and Discussion:** Faculty members have the freedom to teach and engage in classroom discussions without censorship.
- **Freedom from Institutional Censorship:** Faculty members have the right to express their personal views and opinions publicly without institutional control or fear of reprisal, as long as they clearly distinguish their individual opinions from any claim to represent the views of the University.
- **Freedom of Thought and Expression:** Faculty members have the right to freely choose whether or not to endorse, affirm, or express beliefs, affiliations, ideals, or principles regarding matters of contemporary political debate or social action.
- **Freedom to Request Academic Due Process:** In the event of controversies or disputes regarding academic freedom, faculty members have the right to a fair and impartial hearing within the established university processes.

- **Responsibilities:**

- **Pursue Knowledge:** Faculty members have the responsibility to strive for accurate, truthful statements in their teaching, research, and writing. Scholarly endeavors should be pursued with intellectual honesty, curiosity, and humility. Faculty members should remain open to revisiting and re-evaluating their views and methodologies in light of new evidence, perspectives, or scholarly developments.
- **Uphold the Pedagogic Mission:** Faculty should maintain the integrity of the educational experience by ensuring that they do not abuse their position of power by requiring students to adopt particular ideologies. Teaching should be related to the subject matter of the course and contribute constructively to the learning experience.
- **Maintain a Respectful Academic Environment:** Because robust debate and disagreement are integral to academic life, faculty members have a responsibility to foster an environment where diverse viewpoints are freely expressed and debated in the classroom, among faculty, and on campus. They should encourage students and colleagues to challenge and critically evaluate all ideas, including their own, and to approach disagreements and disputes in a constructive manner.

- **Distinguish between Personal Views and Institutional Representation:** When expressing personal opinions or beliefs, especially in public forums, faculty members should make it clear that they are not speaking on behalf of the university unless officially designated to do so.
- **Recognize Established Limitations on Free Expression.** Faculty members should recognize and respect that academic freedom does not support speech, expressions or actions unprotected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, including those that meet the legal criteria for harassment, true threats, defamation, invasion of privacy, destruction of property or disruptive to classes or other campus activities.

These rights and responsibilities aim to protect the essential freedom inherent in the principles of academic freedom and free expression, while also recognizing the duty of faculty members to safeguard the integrity and knowledge-based mission of the academic community. The dual emphasis on rights and responsibilities ensures that academic freedom protects the independent research and teaching of each faculty member, serves the core values of the broader academic community, encourages a vibrant community of debate, and contributes to the flourishing of a democratic society committed to free expression.

Revised and submitted to Interim Chancellor Lee Roberts on February 27, 2024 by:

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ⁱ The Committee has drawn on these statements to establish the foundation and rationale for the specific principles of this Carolina Commitment to Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression, so we provide key excerpts from each document here.

UNC defines its broad, state-supported educational goals, in part, with these overarching explanations in the University’s Mission Statement:

Our mission is to serve as a center for research, scholarship, and creativity and to teach a diverse community of undergraduate, graduate, and professional students to become the next generation of leaders. . . . [W]e invest our knowledge and resources to enhance access to learning and to foster the success and prosperity of each rising generation . . . [and] to enhance the quality of life for all people in the State.

The UNC System’s Board of Governors affirms the importance of academic freedom for the University’s faculty in its Faculty Code, which states that UNC “*supports and encourages freedom of inquiry for faculty members*” to ensure that they may “*responsibly pursue . . . teaching, learning, research, discussion, and publication free from internal or external restraints that would unreasonably restrict their academic endeavors.*” More generally, the UNC Faculty Code emphasizes that “*faculty and students . . . shall share the responsibility for maintaining an environment in which academic freedom flourishes and in which the rights of each member of the academic community are respected.*”

The University’s Faculty has also confirmed academic freedom to be a framework for all the teaching, learning, research, and service that embodies its shared academic and public goals. “*The ability to speak freely, debate vigorously, and engage deeply with differing viewpoints is the bedrock of our aspirations at Carolina,*” the Faculty at UNC declared in a 2018 resolution of its governing Council. “*As the oldest state university in the country, with a long and complex history, we are ever aware that speaking out on controversial issues often raises opposition and efforts to silence the outspoken. Therefore, the faculty of [UNC] hereby resolve to endorse the principles for the promotion and protection of free speech on campus that were originally articulated by the faculty at the University of Chicago [in 2015].*”

These statements provide a clear rationale for the institutional defense of academic freedom and the institutional support for democratic traditions. They are also aligned with The American Association of University Professors’ Statement on Academic Freedom from 1940, which has been updated with additional themes in 2023. The context for academic freedom and free expression constantly evolves with the advent of new technologies and the emergence of new public conflicts; however, the following excerpts from the AAUP statement remain a concise, valid summary of key principles and practices that must be protected within and beyond the University.

[Statement in 1940] *Teachers are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results, subject to the adequate performance of their academic duties. . . . 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. . . . College and University teachers are [also] citizens. . . . 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. . . . 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.

[Additional Statement in 2023] University leaders have no obligation to speak out on the most controversial issues of the day. Their duty is to protect the academic freedom, free speech, and associational rights of faculty and students to speak on all topics of public or political interest without fear of intimidation, retaliation, or punishment.