

AD HOC COMMITTEE TO DEFEND THE UNIVERSITY

In recent years, universities across the country have been targeted by outside groups seeking to influence what is taught and who can teach. To achieve their political agendas, these groups have defamed scholars, pressured administrators, and tried to bypass or subvert established procedures of academic governance. As a consequence, faculty have been denied jobs or tenure, and scholars have been denied public platforms from which to share their viewpoints. This violates an important principle of scholarship, the free exchange of ideas, subjecting them to ideological and political tests. These attacks threaten academic freedom and the core mission of institutions of higher education in a democratic society.

Unfortunately and ironically, many of the most vociferous campaigns targeting universities and their faculty have been launched by groups portraying themselves as defenders of Israel. These groups have targeted scholars who have expressed perspectives on Israeli policies and the Israeli Palestinian conflict with which they disagree. To silence those they consider their political enemies, they have used a range of tactics such as:

- unfounded insinuations and allegations, in the media and on websites, of anti-Semitism or sympathy for terrorism or “un-Americanism;”
- efforts to broaden definitions of anti-Semitism to include scholarship and teaching that is critical of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and of Israel;
- pressures on university administrations by threatening to withhold donations if faculty they have targeted are hired or awarded tenure;
- campaigns to deny scholars the opportunity to present their views to the wider public;
- the promotion of efforts to restrict federal funding for area studies programs and the teaching of critical languages on political grounds;
- lawsuits in the name of the “right” of individual students not to hear ideas that may challenge or contradict their beliefs;
- and demands in the name of “balance” and “diversity” that those with whom they disagree be prevented from speaking unless paired with someone whose viewpoint they approve of. The suppression of free speech undermines academic freedom and subverts the norms of academic life. It poses a serious threat to institutions of higher education in the United States. The university should be a place where different interpretations can be explored and competing ideas exchanged.

Academic freedom means not only the right to pursue a variety of interpretations, but the maintenance of standards of truth and acceptability by one’s peers. It is university faculty, not outside political groups with partisan political agenda, who are best able to judge the quality of their peers’ research and teaching. This is not just a question of academic autonomy, but of the future of a democratic society. This is a time in which we need more thoughtful reflection about the world, not less. A study by a Harvard sociologist last summer found that “a greater percentage of social scientists today feels their academic freedom has been threatened than was the case during the McCarthy era.” It is time to defend the norms of scholarship and the best traditions of the academy.

We, the undersigned, therefore pledge:

- to speak out against those who attack our colleagues and our universities in order to achieve their political goals;
- to urge university administrators and trustees to defend academic freedom and the norms of academic life, even if it means incurring the displeasure of non-scholarly groups, the media among them;
- to vigorously promote our views in the media and through the Internet, and to explain the importance of academic freedom to a sustainable and vibrant democracy;
- to mobilize our students to defend the values and integrity of their institutions. The future of higher education in America, its role in our country’s democracy, and its contribution to world affairs is at stake.

Organizing Committee:

- Joan W. Scott, Institute for Advanced Study • Jeremy Adelman, Princeton University
- Edmund Burke III, University of California, Santa Cruz • Steven Caton, Harvard University
- Jonathan Cole, Columbia University.

You can find us on the web at <http://defend.university.googlepages.com/home>, and you can join us in defending academic freedom by contacting defend.university@gmail.com

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