

## The Freedoms of a University

A university has two great obligations to society: to foster the discovery and dissemination of knowledge and understanding, and to prepare students for lives of meaning, purpose, and service.

To discharge the first obligation, a university must ensure that the work of its scholars receives robust, informed, and impartial appraisal that applies the best truth-seeking standards appropriate to their discipline – *without* pressure to bow to the opinions of the state, a corporation, a university administrator, or those (including students) who express feelings of outrage or harm about ideas they dislike. When it comes to the university's research mission, academic freedom exists to enable *discovery without fetters*.

So a university must steadfastly advance academic freedom and resist all manner of encroachment upon it. It must operate with full transparency as to sources of funding; push back against attempts to use state power to curtail academic freedom; and, when necessary, issue firm reminders that extending the frontiers of knowledge inevitably risks offense.

To discharge its second obligation, a university must train students and teachers to *engage across disagreement*, learning to treat with intellectual seriousness and honesty the wide range of ideas and perspectives that live within our diverse community. We all suffer from blind spots and a dangerous if natural resistance to considering the full range of what is possible. A university education targets this resistance, developing in students (and faculty) the habits of mind crucial to a self-governing people. In our teaching, academic freedom exists first and foremost to oppose *the oppression and poverty of ignorance*.

So a university must safeguard two essential freedoms. Every member of the academic community should be *free from fear of reprisal* for positions they defend, questions they ask, or ideas they entertain. We should all welcome thoughtful critique – and be able to engage with each other confident that neither attacks on our character nor the threat of institutional sanction will take its place. Second, every member of our community should enjoy *full standing to speak and be heard*, regardless of background or social position. It's not enough that we refrain from threatening those whose ideas we don't like. We also have a moral duty to listen, and to approach disagreement in a spirit of genuine curiosity, motivated by the desire to learn from each other, and open to the possibility that any of us, at any time, might be wrong.

In living up to these values, many parts of our university play a critical role:

- the administration must set the tone with a full-throated endorsement of academic freedom, and by adopting and enforcing rules that safeguard the freedoms we should all enjoy;
- the faculty should recognize the singular role that their position and expertise give them in creating educational settings that promote these freedoms and their responsible exercise;
- the students, joining other members of the campus community, should embrace the challenge of responding to unsettling ideas with an ethic of compassion, courage, and curiosity.

It is the embracing of these freedoms that allows a university to push back the frontiers of knowledge and equip its members to serve with wisdom.

*Adopted by the Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard on January 31, 2024.*