

## **Rep Council Position Statement on Academic Freedom**

Dear Members of the IUP Community,

Recently a member of our faculty union has come under intense criticism and scrutiny in national and social media. We would like to express our support for Alison Downie and for all faculty colleagues dedicated to their work as teachers, scholars, and university employees. Every day, IUP faculty balance the many responsibilities of a teacher: to engage intellectually with the subject and material of the course; to structure the material so that all students can learn; to promote critical thinking; to maintain civility; and to be fair and helpful to students.

Neither individual faculty nor universities should be above criticism, but much of the public discourse has been based on a partial or erroneous understanding of the purpose of Academic Freedom and of the professor's role in maintaining a civil and encouraging learning environment. Conversations about Academic Freedom in American universities date back one-hundred years, but took modern shape in the 1940 AAUP Statement of Principles which recognized that "the common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition."

Academic Freedom serves to protect students as much as faculty by insuring that the classes they attend are designed by experienced professionals who employ their best judgment about what students in the field need to know. It enables faculty to fulfill their responsibility of giving students complex information that may challenge them to explore their values, beliefs, and biases.

Contrary to common belief, Academic Freedom does not give faculty the license to conduct classes in any way they see fit. The IUP faculty contract states that a faculty member is "entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing his/her subject, but he/she should be careful not to introduce into his/her teaching controversial matter which has no relation to his/her subject." Nor does Academic Freedom or the First Amendment provide that faculty or students can say anything at any time. Students should have the opportunity to air their views, but as the leader of the class, the professor must create and maintain a civil, orderly, and productive environment. If a student does not recognize the professor's right and duty to structure the class, the professor must take steps to restore that structure, not to prevent the student from expressing an opinion, but to maintain an environment in which all students may engage with the material.

The pursuit of academic freedom is not always popular. Currently many critics of higher education claim that it promotes "left-wing" agendas and marginalizes conservative ones; in the past, the opposite claim was common. The truth is that IUP faculty hold a variety of ideological positions, but all are sincerely engaged with the issues of their field.

IUP APSCUF stands behind faculty exercising Academic Freedom. It supports fair and dispassionate due process for resolving any classroom conflicts. In the words of the AAUP, "We believe that faculty play an important role in a free society and that academic freedom requires and supports a democracy that thrives on dissent, critical inquiry, free speech and free research." These principles are key to our mission to serve the students and the Commonwealth, graduating students prepared to be informed, empowered, and "engaged citizens of a diverse, democratic society . . ." (IUP Learning Outcomes). Representative Council IUP APSCUF

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