

Academic Freedom at Johns Hopkins

Academic freedom is the wellspring of an open and free university.

Academic freedom protects the right to speak and create, to question and dissent, to participate in debate on and off campus, and to invite others to do the same, all without fear of restraint or penalty. It is designed to afford members of the community the broadest possible scope for unencumbered expression, investigation, analysis, and discourse. Indeed, among the measures of an academic community is its success in creating a culture of active discussion and debate, one where its members open themselves to the views of others, even when those views are provocative or unfamiliar.

Our university is committed to the steadfast protection of the right to academic freedom. This commitment emerges from the university's time-honored role in the creation of knowledge and the sifting and winnowing of ideas. Without full and vigorous protection of this principle, the university's capacity to discharge its hallowed mission would be compromised.

However, academic freedom is not unbounded. As with the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, on whose precepts it is based, academic freedom does not guarantee the right to defame or threaten, to deface or harass, or to incite violence or infringe on privacy. And reasonable and viewpoint-neutral rules for the time, place, and manner of expression are a legitimate way to ensure the orderly conduct of the university.

Further, academic freedom entails academic responsibility. There is no right to plagiarize or otherwise engage in academic or scientific misconduct. The exercise of judgment on the basis of professional criteria and the highest intellectual standards, in matters such as academic quality and performance evaluations, is both permissible and necessary. Even so, limits such as these, essential to the functioning of the university, should be seen as narrow exceptions to the presumption of open and vigorous expression.

A professional and respectful exchange of views is integral to creating a positive environment for learning, teaching, and research. Each of us has a critical role to play in cultivating a climate of intellectual diversity, dignity, and respect. But academic freedom necessarily permits the expression of views that even the vast majority of the community may find misguided, ignorant, or offensive. The appropriate response to such statements in an academic setting is not to censor or punish, but to challenge, criticize, and persuade.

Johns Hopkins continues to expand its connections to a range of partnerships with external entities. Some funding sources may seek to control data and research findings or to limit their dissemination. And the university's mission, its influence, and its presence reach far beyond the traditional campus, to countries and cultures and institutions that do not share the same understanding of free speech and academic freedom principles. In these situations, special care must be taken to maintain the university's core principles of free and independent inquiry.

Johns Hopkins was home to the early development of the concept of academic freedom in this country. The torch of free inquiry is a critical part of our heritage and our mission. Each of us, in our time as members of this community of scholars, bears a responsibility for nurturing its flame, and passing it on to those who will follow.