



Guide Series

Academic Freedom in Christian Colleges



Center for Academic
Faithfulness & Flourishing

About the Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing

The Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing exists to empower Christian colleges and universities to advance their faith-based missions, equip campus leaders with the resources necessary to flourish in our present age, and encourage broader support for these unique and valuable institutions. To advance this mission, CAFF seeks to accomplish three goals: (1) Reassert institutional faithfulness by developing a cohesive and credible counter-narrative to ideologies that undermine Christian higher education; (2) Redesign organizational networks by helping Christian colleges and universities cultivate ideologically aligned exchange partners; and (3) Reinvigorate institutional flourishing by designing initiatives that strengthen the governance, management, and financial position of faith-based institutions of higher education.



Academic Freedom in Christian Colleges

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Executive Summary

Academic freedom is a bedrock value of the American academy, yet few understand its purposes and limits within the context of a faith-based institution. This report provides an overview of the concept's historical development as well as its codification by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in the mid-twentieth century. It then details how the unique characteristics of the Christian college—its mission and commitments—cast a different vision for the pursuit of truth that requires a distinctive approach to academic freedom. The piece concludes by offering recommendations for administrative practice that foster individual freedom within the bounds of institutional commitments.

About the Author

David J. Ayers is a seasoned scholar and academic leader who has served in faculty and senior administrative roles on five faith-based campuses: The King's College, Dallas Baptist University, Grove City College, Handong Global University, and Franciscan University. A sociologist by training, he has authored numerous policy reports and six books: *Experiencing Social Research: An Introduction Using MicroCase*; *Investigating Social Problems: Using MicroCase ExplorIT*; *Christian Marriage: A Comprehensive Introduction*; *After the Revolution: Sex and the Single Evangelical*; *A Student's Guide to Dating, Marriage & Sex*; and *Why Would Anyone Get Married?* He holds a B.A. in Psychology from Edinboro University in Pennsylvania, an M.A. in Sociology from American University, and a Ph.D. in Sociology from New York University.

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Director's Preface

It is widely known that faith-based colleges and universities adhere to different religious commitments than public institutions. It is also generally understood that faculty who choose to teach at a faith-based college will themselves be required to align with certain expectations regarding the content of their teaching and scholarship. However, where these lines are drawn—and why—often remains a source of confusion and misunderstanding. Many falsely assume that imposing any restriction on academic freedom at all will limit institutional potential and damage educational quality.

In the following report, David Ayers provides a primer on academic freedom in the Christian college context by elucidating five key dimensions of the issue. He begins by explaining that academic freedom is essential to faith-based colleges and universities because it facilitates the pursuit of truth, preserves institutional diversity within higher education, and enables institutional forms that support the church. Next, he details the origins and development of the concept of academic freedom and also reviews the emergence of industry standards within American higher education that codified expectations for faculty and institutions. Ayers then explores the distinctive characteristics of Christian colleges that both distinguish them from their secular peers and present unique tasks their leaders must accomplish—namely, articulating how the institution's

educational purpose relates to its religious commitments, providing for individual freedom within said commitments, and maintaining missional integrity with those commitments. He concludes by offering guidance for how those entrusted with the governance and management of Christian colleges can build and protect distinctly Christian academic communities.

Many falsely assume that imposing any restriction on academic freedom at all will limit institutional potential and damage educational quality.

The report marks the inauguration of CAFF's guide series, whose entries will illuminate key issues in higher education for leaders serving in administration and on governing boards at Christian colleges and universities. May these reports equip all who serve in Christian higher education to preserve and advance this distinctive institutional type for decades to come.

P. Jesse Rine, Ph.D.

Executive Director

Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing
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Introduction: Why Academic Freedom Matters

Academic freedom is vital to the health of colleges and universities. How it is framed and applied determines a great deal about the character and quality of any institution of higher education. Thus, it is imperative that the stakeholders of such institutions—not only faculty and administration but also trustees, parents, students, and alumni—respect academic freedom and develop a clear understanding of what it is and how it works.

Sadly, however, misperceptions and myths about the essential principles and rules associated with academic freedom abound, both among those employed by or overseeing colleges and universities and among their

wider constituencies and outside observers. Beyond that, there are legitimate differences of opinion about how to interpret and apply even the most basic elements of academic freedom, especially as they are negotiated within the context of specific cases and disputes. Although the main essence and core principles of academic freedom can be stated succinctly and simply, there are many complexities, blurry boundaries, and offsetting considerations in both institutional practice and the manner in which these principles are addressed legally, politically, and in the realms of public opinion and discourse.

One key issue is that, like all other freedoms, academic freedom is not absolute; it is always qualified. These qualifications are then also

subject to various interpretations, debates, and difficulties. What seem to be reasonable limits upon academic freedom to one party are often grievous violations of it to another.

All this is to say that academic freedom is a consequential topic that matters to everyone involved in higher education, regardless of capacity or role. Its main contours can be set forth briefly and understandably. However, academic freedom will often be complex and disputatious when put into practice.

What about those colleges and universities that are explicitly faith-based? In particular, how does academic freedom function within Christian institutions whose missions are centered around and unified by core doctrinal beliefs applied across the range of academic disciplines and whose faculty are expected to, and voluntarily agree to, embrace and uphold the same? These institutions commonly state their purposes in terms of applying a “Christian worldview,” providing “Christ-centered” learning, or doing “faith-learning integration” in each academic field. Moreover, they also place a high importance upon “the moral and spiritual formation of students.”¹ Thus, such colleges and universities emphasize the responsibility of professors to go beyond classroom teaching, research, and publication to also serve as Christian mentors and role models of sound and moral living, as defined by their common faith. How do these expectations interact with the concept and exercise of academic freedom?

How academic freedom is framed and applied determines a great deal about the character and quality of any institution of higher education.

Academic freedom certainly applies to Christian colleges and universities. However, this freedom looks significantly different within such places, in principle and practice, than it does in public, or even most private, institutions of higher education. Yet its existence within the Christian academy is vital to the pursuit of truth, the preservation of institutional diversity, and the strengthening of the church.

The Pursuit of Truth

In 1940, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a statement on academic freedom. This landmark document enunciates widely respected professional norms and centers academic freedom on the compelling need for faculty and their students to be able to pursue and express truth freely in research, writing, teaching, and learning. The statement notes that this facilitates the common good for society by supporting the advancement of knowledge and creating the kind of liberating environment associated with the best teaching and learning. Further, it clarifies that the purpose of academic

¹ Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), “What Is Christian Higher Education?”, 2024, <http://www.cccu.org/about/#heading-what-is-christian-higher-3>

freedom is not merely to serve the personal interests of faculty or institutions but rather to enable pursuit of something higher. It carries with it as many obligations and duties as it does protections and rights.² In addition, academia must include faculty and students challenging ideas and theories, even popular and established notions, and must allow for a diversity of perspectives. To wit, it is difficult to imagine the advancement of knowledge across human history without some ruffling of feathers, including those of powerful establishment figures in and out of the scholarly community.

Undoubtedly, Christian colleges and universities should be committed to the pursuit of truth and to protecting their faculty and students in that pursuit. After all, the Christian academy serves the Author and Highest Expression of Truth Himself, who certainly challenged many entrenched ideas of His day as the Incarnate Son of God. He is the One who said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32) and who called Himself “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).³ Jesus described the Holy Spirit as “the Spirit of truth” who “will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). Christianity teaches that truth liberates, that the Word is truth, and ultimately, that all truth points to Jesus Christ.

Christians should be passionate about pursuing truth in every setting, and certainly in their colleges and universities. This includes identifying and correcting errors, even their own, and steadily advancing in knowledge. Moreover, as Christians grow in truth, they can contribute wiser and better service in numerous areas of life. A sound Christian desire to show mutual respect to other persons made in the image of God,⁴ to follow the Golden Rule, and to serve others well should ensure that each member of these institutions is eager to protect the right of all members of the academic community to pursue truth. This includes not just the rights of self or of likeminded others, but of those with whom one disagrees. To honor God is to pursue truth and to defend that activity in others. In the context of Christian higher education, this principle requires a robust commitment to academic freedom.

Christian colleges and universities should be committed to the pursuit of truth and to protecting their faculty and students in that pursuit.

² See American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure with 1970 Interpretive Comments, in *AAUP: Policy Documents and Reports*, 11th ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 13-19, <https://www.aaup.org/file/1940%20Statement.pdf>.

³ Scripture quotations here and elsewhere are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®). ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Ivory Tower or Holy Mountain? Faith and Academic Freedom,” *Academe* 87, no. 1 (2001), 20.

Society is well served by having a diversity of institutions with unique identities, missions, and perspectival frameworks across all areas of life, including colleges and universities.

Preserving Institutional Diversity

The mainstream secular approach to academic freedom exemplified by the AAUP's statement, particularly in its 1970 interpretative comments, generally applies to individuals. But what of the freedoms of academic institutions themselves? One common perspective is that the latter, as a brief 1967 report from the University of Chicago strongly and famously stated, are expected to maintain viewpoint neutrality "out of respect for free inquiry and the obligation to cherish a diversity of viewpoints."⁵ This is sometimes called "institutional neutrality," a position that, according to Jacob Levy, "has traditionally accompanied and strengthened academic freedom." Levy proposes that "institutions should stay silent and neutral" on matters not directly associated with their business operations and should purposefully abstain from establishing "an orthodoxy," including "substantive political or religious opinions" where such "would chill the freedom of its members to pursue their own ideas and arguments."⁶

One major problem with this idea is that, as Eric Schliesser's reply to Levy's argument noted, "universities do not have uniform missions." They can be united around various purposes and projects, often deeply rooted in institutional history, including "some confessional or religious orientation." This type of institutional diversity is consistent with the entire liberal project—and particularly with the needs of a pluralistic society. Thus, Schliesser argues that "universities and colleges should interpret academic freedom *in light of their particular corporate identity*" (emphasis added).⁷ Society is well served by having a diversity of institutions with unique identities, missions, and perspectival frameworks across all areas of life, including colleges and universities.

The AAUP model for academic freedom, as alluded to above, does not adequately address *institutional* academic freedom. This is problematic for Christian higher education because, as Ringenberg notes, "institutional academic freedom is the phrase

5 Kalven Committee, "Report on the University's Role in Political and Social Action," Office of the Provost, University of Chicago, November 11, 1967, https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt_o.pdf.

6 Jacob T. Levy, "Campus Culture Wars Are a Teachable Moment in How Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom Differ," *The Globe and Mail*, January 12, 2024, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-campus-culture-wars-are-a-teachable-moment-in-how-freedom-of-speech/>.

7 Eric Schliesser, "On Academic Freedom and Institutional Neutrality," *Out of the Crooked Timber*, March 22, 2024, <https://crookedtimber.org/2024/03/22/on-academic-freedom-and-institutional-neutrality/>.

A proper understanding of academic freedom is absolutely essential to preserving institutional diversity within the American system of higher education.

most commonly used to describe the primary Christian college approach to the subject of academic freedom.”⁸ It is worth noting, moreover, that this institutional approach is well recognized in American courts.⁹

Should those outside the Christian college community support a religious institution’s right to qualify academic freedom within doctrinal and ethical boundaries? Eminent legal scholar Michael McConnell thinks so. He first makes a similar point to Schliesser’s as to why preserving this right is of profound social value—indeed, why all have a stake in it: “To impose the secular norm of academic freedom on unwilling religious colleges and universities would increase the homogeneity—and decrease the vitality—of American intellectual life.”¹⁰ In the world of ideas, institutional academic freedom does not stifle; instead, it vitalizes, and thus it supports true pluralism across academe. Later, McConnell extends his defense of

religious colleges and universities’ need for faith-based boundaries around individual academic freedom as defined by the AAUP. According to McConnell, maintaining these boundaries enriches the entire enterprise of higher education, including its vital contribution to knowledge and intellectual life:

Few observers would doubt that religious scholars and institutions have made significant contributions to the ethical, cultural, and intellectual life of our nation. Religious notions of the pursuit of knowledge might well be intolerable for a modern scientific, pluralistic nation if universally imposed; but, as adopted voluntarily by a limited number of institutions, they enrich our intellectual life by contributing to the diversity of thought and preserving important alternatives to post-Enlightenment secular orthodoxy. Their very distinctiveness makes them better able to resist the popular currents of majoritarian culture and thus to preserve the seeds of dissent and alternative understandings that may later be welcomed by the wider society.

But though few openly challenge the worth of religious colleges and universities, many are indifferent or even hostile to the practices that may be necessary for their preservation.¹¹

8 William C. Ringenberg, *The Christian College and the Meaning of Academic Freedom: Truth-Seeking in Community* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 99. See also Robert K. Poch, *Academic Freedom in Higher Education: Rights, Responsibilities, and Limitations*, ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 4 (Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development, 1993), 76.

9 Poch, *Academic Freedom*, 76.

10 Michael W. McConnell, “Academic Freedom in Religious Colleges and Universities,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 53, no. 3 (1990): 304, https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=12592&context=journal_articles (also quoted in Poch, *Academic Freedom*, 76).

11 McConnell, “Academic Freedom in Religious Colleges,” 312.

In addition, the institutional academic freedom of faith-based colleges and universities plays an indispensable role in sustaining religious freedom, a core right of the American constitutional system. Simply put, as McConnell states, to deny this form of academic freedom would damage the religious freedom of all Americans:

Imposition of the secular norm of academic freedom would pose a serious threat to the ability of nonmainstream religions to maintain their identity and proclaim their vision in secular America. Even if the accommodation of religious approaches to knowledge were not valuable to the advancement of knowledge itself, a modification of academic freedom principles would nonetheless be justified because of its importance to religious freedom.¹²

Finally, the institutional academic freedom of religious colleges to be united by, and to work and serve within, particular doctrinal and ethical truth claims they hold in common also guarantees the freedom of individuals, such as the freedom of students to study at faith-based colleges and the freedom of faculty to choose to teach in an institution that shares their faith. Denying the Christian college's right to operate according to its particular faith tradition eliminates everyone else's freedom to serve and study in such institutions.

It is important to point out that no one is being forced to join themselves to or otherwise support such faith-based colleges or universities—but neither should citizens be

Faith-based colleges and universities provide valuable theological enrichment that most students would not receive unless they enrolled in graduate-level seminary education.

denied the right to do so. Imposing a one-sided interpretation of academic freedom across all higher education—such as emphasizing institutional neutrality as a universal good or ignoring the dynamics of institutional academic freedom altogether—effectively results in fewer institutional options for everyone. For this reason, a proper understanding of academic freedom is absolutely essential to preserving institutional diversity within the American system of higher education.

Strengthening the Church

Christians from a wide range of faith traditions support religious colleges and universities that function within clear faith-based parameters while allowing for vibrant truth-seeking and reasoned dissent of the type that academic freedom is meant to foster. The faithful view these religious institutions as performing a vital service to their churches and other ministries and movements. Indeed, faith-based colleges and universities provide valuable theological enrichment that most students would not receive unless they enrolled in graduate-level seminary

¹² McConnell, "Academic Freedom in Religious Colleges," 304. See also 315ff.

Christians value religious colleges and universities as seedbeds for theological reflection on topics of interest to the church.

education. For example, Roman Catholic universities allow students to study economics with scholars who work within the Catholic tradition. Likewise, Presbyterian students can learn biology, physics, and chemistry in colleges where professors dedicate their lives to addressing these topics—including handling modern intellectual challenges to the faith—within distinctly Reformed confessional frameworks. And students pursuing degrees in social work and family studies at Methodist institutions can expect to receive instruction from a distinctly Wesleyan faith perspective. Classroom learning across all of these contexts is coupled with moral formation in the tradition of each college’s particular denomination or religious order. College graduates who have undergone such a worldview-centric educational experience bring a unique perspective that enriches their contributions to church and society.

Christians also value religious colleges and universities as seedbeds for theological reflection on topics of interest to the church. Within every Christian tradition, there are controversies and questions tied directly to beliefs that are viewed as central or foundational. These issues need to be addressed, at least partly, by professionals intellectually trained to do so within those traditions. Christian colleges and universities

can perform a leading role in helping their broader faith communities, and many others, think through such issues. For example, not just theologians but physicists, biologists, chemists, logicians, anthropologists, and so on are essential contributors to debates over human origins, biological evolution, and the like. Or consider the increasingly thorny disagreements over human sexuality, gender identity, and gender dysphoria. Again, many academic specialties beyond theology contribute helpfully to understanding and debating the core issues involved, including what practical interventions are wise for those serving in pastoral and other counseling ministries or what policy recommendations might be advisable in official government or business settings. Not all good scholarship and debate about theological application flows out of Christian colleges and universities, but much of it does; this is the case precisely because these institutions have been designed to nurture such important conversations.

In sum, taken together, the aforementioned topics—the pursuit of truth, the preservation of institutional diversity, and the strengthening of the church—clearly demonstrate why academic freedom should matter to those who care about Christian higher education. Thus, attention will now be given to examining academic freedom in more depth, beginning with an overview of its historical roots as they apply to the contemporary American system of higher education. The balance of this guide will explore how academic freedom intersects with other key elements of the academic enterprise such as faculty tenure and governance as well as the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, which guarantees the



right to free speech. A concluding section will describe how academic freedom differs in the Christian college context—including how academic actors and organizations outside of the latter often view and treat

these differences—and supply various considerations governing boards and academic administrators should keep in mind when leading Christian colleges and universities.



The Origins of Academic Freedom

Although the concept of academic freedom as we understand it in the United States today did not fully crystallize until well into the twentieth century, the broader idea, and our rationale for viewing it as central to the academic enterprise, has much older roots.¹³ In antiquity in the West, philosophical schools developed around central figures who mentored others in the discovery and refinement of knowledge.¹⁴ As loosely affiliated intellectual groups gave way to early medieval

universities, scholars enjoyed significant freedom to pursue academic inquiries, so long as church authority and doctrine—as well as civil authorities—were not seriously threatened. Something like academic freedom was particularly enjoyed outside the realms of philosophy and theology, including law, medicine, and mathematics. As Ringenberg stated, “though the medieval period is not known for its intellectual openness,” the most common methods of instruction in the schools “were remarkable for encouraging students to understand multiple positions on the

¹³ This section on origins draws upon and summarizes lengthier histories of academic freedom found in two excellent sources cited above: Poch, *Academic Freedom*, 20-25, and Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 57-82.

¹⁴ Poch cites as an example Plato’s Academy, stating that “the ancient academy was ... a community of thinkers drawn together in the logical quest for truth” (*Academic Freedom*, 20).

Although the concept of academic freedom as we understand it in the United States today did not fully crystallize until well into the twentieth century, the broader idea has much older roots.

major issues.” Despite limitations on inquiry, “instructors received a large measure of respect ... from both the clerical and political authorities,” such that “the church and state allowed much liberty to the universities as long as their discussions remained ‘academic.’”¹⁵ In other words, within certain spheres and social settings, there was a tacit consensus that freedom of inquiry was desirable.

The earliest colonial universities in America were founded from the mid-1600s to the mid-1700s. Though these were modeled after institutions such as Cambridge and Oxford, they were also established, staffed, and governed differently in ways that limited and qualified academic freedom more than the latter, at least at first. As Hofstadter and Smith pointed out in their 1961 classic *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, the latter had been founded and run by “groups of mature scholars,” while colonial colleges were founded by communities, were overseen by civic leaders and ministers, and employed faculty that were often young, inexperienced, and transient to whom the sponsoring communities were unlikely to give “reins of control.”¹⁶

Similar realities applied to the plethora of small denominational colleges that sprung up across the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century. Certainly, faculty were almost always expected to uphold the doctrinal standards of whichever denomination or religious group controlled their college. As Ringenberg pointed out, “During the colonial period and for the first century of the national period, with very few exceptions, to be a college in America was to be a Protestant college.”¹⁷ However, after the Civil War, three developments began to increase what we would now call the extent and scope of academic freedom in many American colleges and universities.¹⁸

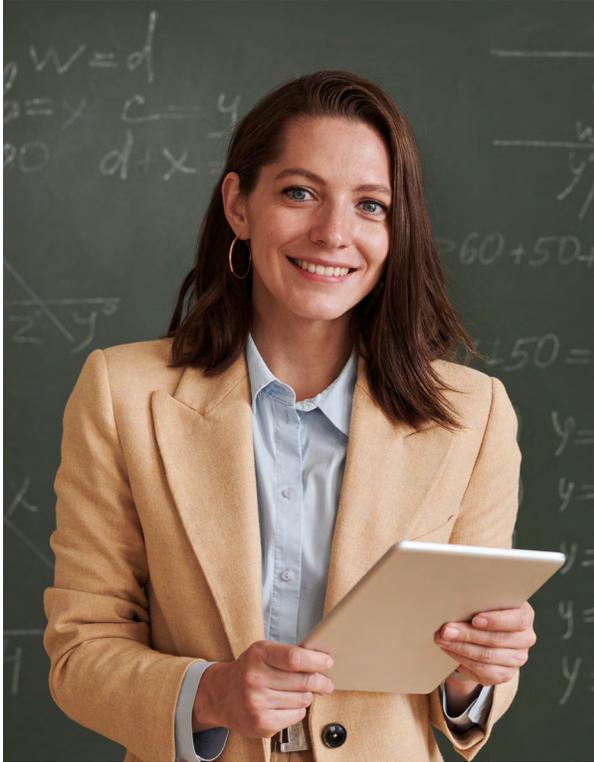
The first was the heightened emphasis on practical, applied learning and advancement of related knowledge demanded by the Industrial Revolution. This was exemplified by the creation of land-grant public universities, focused on applied areas such as agriculture and engineering, beginning especially during and following the Civil War. The desire to acquire and transmit practical knowledge that could help the country become a scientific and industrial leader meant allowing greater freedom and experimentation in the pursuit of learning.

¹⁵ Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 57-58.

¹⁶ As quoted in Poch, *Academic Freedom*, 21-22.

¹⁷ Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 69.

¹⁸ For more detail regarding these developments, see Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 78-86.



As the twentieth century dawned, American professors increasingly desired academic freedoms similar to those they experienced in their graduate education.

Meanwhile, previously emphasized academic subjects such as philosophy and religion became less important in these institutions.

The second was the expanding influence of much more sweeping and absolute notions of academic freedom, for both

professors and students, that began to flow out of German universities, particularly the University of Berlin. These included the freedom to question, and even attack, every element of orthodox Christian belief, a product of the German higher criticism which would eventually sweep through many American churches. The main qualification on academic freedom in German universities was that they did not tolerate criticisms of certain institutions, such as the government and military.

This German approach to academic freedom eventually began to have a powerful effect on the faculty and governance of American colleges and universities. Not only were academics in the United States aware of the German system and its products, but many had crossed the Atlantic to study in German universities before taking their posts in American colleges. As the twentieth century dawned, American professors increasingly desired academic freedoms similar to those they experienced in their graduate education. Despite this trend, differences persisted. As Ringenberg succinctly stated, as academic freedom was transported from Germany to the United States, it “developed into a distinctly American form. It was for professors much more than students, it did not restrict professors from critiquing the government, and it found greater reception in the universities than in the liberal arts colleges.”¹⁹

Third, connected to the latter two influences was the gradual secularization of not only public, but even many officially Christian,

¹⁹ Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 67.

colleges and universities. This included educational leaders Ringenberg described as “moderate-to-liberal Christians who were still embracing Christian views and morality while adopting secular methodology.” Spurring on secularization were “the growth of graduate programs, the emergence of professional disciplines and specialization in teaching and research within those disciplines, a new and broadened curriculum, and the movement of religious study to the mostly self-standing seminaries.”²⁰ These changes invited new and nontraditional ways of framing research questions, conceiving the aims of teaching, and defining the boundaries of what constitutes proper knowledge.

Against this historical backdrop, which introduced competing understandings of the nature and function of academic inquiry, American higher education continued to develop and professionalize. From this point forward, academic freedom existed as a bedrock principle that was firmly ensconced in the life of the university, yet its contours and boundaries had not yet been carefully defined. This work would be accomplished by the emerging professional association for college and university professors—the AAUP—which would create industry standards that hold sway to this day.

²⁰ Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 81.



The Emergence of Industry Standards

Shaped by the increasing desire to articulate and enjoy broad academic freedom, and with considerable antipathy toward historic Christian colleges and their doctrinal boundaries for faculty,²¹ the AAUP was established in 1915 through the leadership of Arthur O. Lovejoy and John Dewey. The organization's main purpose was to advance academic freedom and shared governance within colleges and universities.²² Its 1915 *General Declaration of Principles* set forth what organizers believed were

necessary principles of academic freedom. However, at the time of their release, there was still a great deal of division about the 1915 *Principles* among American academics. This included concerns about the applicability of the *Principles* to faculty of lower rank and questions about tenure that were registered by the “college presidents who formed the AAC [Association of American Colleges] in 1915.”²³

After numerous interactions between the AAUP and AAC over the next twenty-five years, in 1940 the AAUP released a seminal report, *Statement of Principles on Academic*

²¹ Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 84.

²² AAUP, *Mission*, <https://www.aaup.org/about/mission-1>.

²³ Poch, *Academic Freedom*, 27. Today, this organization is known as the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U).

Freedom and Tenure, that avoided or addressed most of the previous divisions. The framework it presented became the main working definition for academic freedom—and description of what is necessary to protect it—within American colleges and universities. As Poch pointed out, the statement became the “centerpiece of popular notions of academic freedom in the United States.”²⁴ Importantly, interpretative comments were added in 1970 and have since functioned as an integral part of this statement.²⁵

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of this document within American higher education. As of 1993, the AAUP *Statement of Principles* had been “endorsed by more than 140 organizations,”²⁶ and new endorsements have continued to be added as recently as this year (2024).²⁷ Furthermore, for public universities, the AAUP statement “serves an important function in the legal system as well, where the courts are hesitant to provide their own interpretation of academic freedom.”²⁸ In fact, in considering academic freedom as an “academic custom” or “academic common law,” the courts often rely on this statement when adjudicating competing claims.²⁹

Unlike public institutions, private colleges and universities are governed by the statement’s principles only to the extent that they choose to adopt their protections. Levinson observed that this is accomplished through such vehicles as “institutional rules and regulations, letters of appointment, faculty handbooks, and, where applicable, collective bargaining agreements. Academic freedom rights are often explicitly incorporated into faculty handbooks, which are sometimes held to be legally binding contracts.”³⁰ Thus, while

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the AAUP’s *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* within American higher education.

private colleges and universities are free to decide whether or not to adopt the AAUP’s framework for academic freedom, it is fair to say that most private institutions formalize many of its principles via these mechanisms.

²⁴ Poch, *Academic Freedom*, 28.

²⁵ An electronic version of the interpretive comments can be viewed at <https://www.aaup.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure#1>. For the full list of endorsers, see <https://www.aaup.org/endorsers-1940-statement>.

²⁶ Poch, *Academic Freedom*, 29.

²⁷ AAUP, *1940 Statement of Principles*, 16-19.

²⁸ Poch, *Academic Freedom*, 29.

²⁹ Rachel Levinson, 2007, “Academic Freedom and the First Amendment,” Presentation to the AAUP Summer Institute, July 2007, <https://www.aaup.org/our-work/protecting-academic-freedom/academic-freedom-and-first-amendment-2007>.

³⁰ Levinson, “Academic Freedom and the First Amendment.”

While faculty are free to pursue their research and writing wherever they believe the search for truth leads them, they must do so in a way that does not interfere with other legitimate expectations that their college or university makes upon them.

Although by the early 2000s the AAUP had declined significantly in terms of membership and “respect for its mission,”³¹ the association’s definition and approaches to upholding academic freedom have retained a place of prominence within the American academy. The *Statement of Principles* articulates a set of professional definitions for academic freedom and describes the purpose of tenure and faculty governance, which together have shaped how colleges and universities are structured and organized today. Properly interpreting these dimensions, as well as how they relate to First Amendment protections, is essential to understanding the boundaries of academic practice.

Development of Professional Definitions

The clearest and most succinct way to communicate the basic principles of academic freedom set forth by the AAUP is to quote directly from the three core assertions on academic freedom presented by the *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure with 1970 Interpretive Comments*:

1. Teachers are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results, subject to the adequate performance of their other academic duties; but research for pecuniary return should be based upon an understanding with the authorities of the institution.
2. 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. Limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be clearly stated in writing at the time of the appointment.
3. College and university teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution. 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. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the

³¹ Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 84.

opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.³²

A few elements in the above assertions require further commentary. Notice that the first point makes clear that, while faculty are free to pursue their research and writing wherever they believe the search for truth leads them, they must do so in a way that does not interfere with other legitimate expectations that their college or university makes upon them. Academic institutions have the right to expect that faculty research and publication will not get in the way of professional duties such as competent teaching and course preparation, attentive advising, meaningful contributions to committee work, and so on, and that faculty will conduct research for pay from outside organizations only within the rules set by their employers. Academic freedom in research and writing does not mean there will be no restrictions on the amount of time spent on research relative to other professional responsibilities, or that faculty can use their institution's time and equipment to earn extra money with their research in ways that are not sanctioned by the college or university. Moreover, in their research and publishing work, faculty will typically be governed by professional ethical standards, including those set by government, their institution, and relevant professional associations. All of these qualifications apply even at a university that has no religious mission or affiliation.

³² AAUP, *1940 Statement of Principles*, 14.

³³ AAUP, *1940 Statement of Principles*, 14.

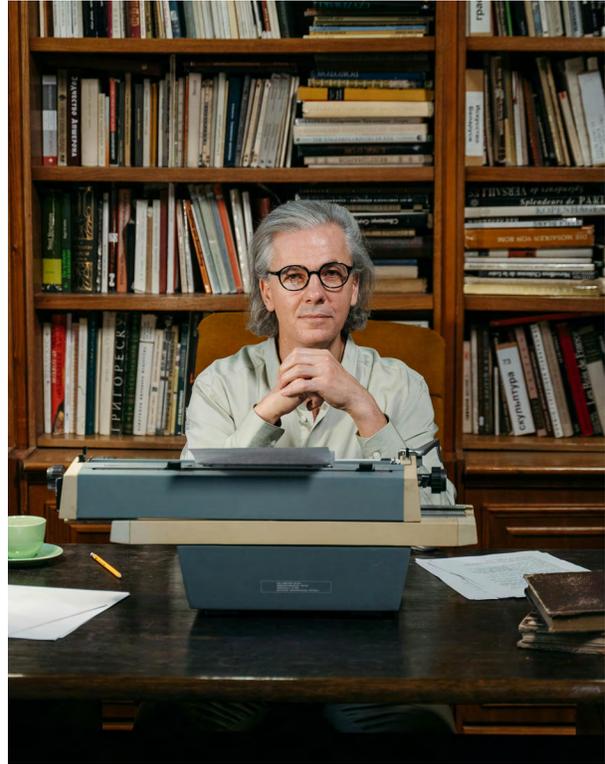
The second point addresses the implications of academic freedom for classroom instruction. An interpretive comment on the second point explains that this principle is not intended “to discourage” faculty from dealing with controversial subjects in the classroom, which are, after all, “at the heart of the free academic inquiry which the entire statement is designed to foster.” The point does assert, however, “the need for teachers to avoid persistently intruding material which has no relation to their subject.”³³ To be sure, sometimes asides into topical areas that are not strictly within the subject of a course are legitimate, such as using literary passages to illustrate sociological concepts or referring to a current political controversy as a modern-day example of a phenomenon described by a classic work of English literature. However,

Academic freedom does not mean that faculty are free to use class time to talk about whatever they wish.

discussing literature or contemporary politics often and at length in a class on statistics would undermine the purpose of the class and prevent important topical material from being covered fully and clearly. Academic freedom does not mean that faculty are free to use class time to talk about whatever they wish. Finally, the second point confirms that academic freedom can legitimately be proscribed by the religious orientation or

other distinct missional aspects of a college or university, provided that those limitations are disclosed at the time of faculty appointment.

The third point addresses the right of faculty to speak freely as citizens outside of the context of their academic research, writing, and teaching. Notice that while it is normally expected that they will do so without censorship from their college or university, this does not mean they can always say whatever they want without any repercussions from their employer. One interpretive comment, for example, mentions “extramural utterances” that “raise grave doubts concerning the teacher’s fitness for his or her position.”³⁴ For instance, as a citizen of the United States, an astronomy professor may not face government retribution for public statements claiming that the moon is made of green cheese or the earth is flat. But he or she may face repercussions within his or her academic department and institution for making such outlandish claims. If a person were to stand by outlandish and unsubstantiated claims for an extended period of time and were censured by other professionals in his or her field, the institution who employs that person would likely regard him or her as unfit to teach. As this third point elucidates, it will often be important for faculty members making such “extramural utterances” to delineate when they speak for themselves rather than for their college or university. For example, colleges and universities routinely urge that faculty make this distinction clear in venues such as personal websites and blogs, especially when handling controversial matters, including those related to their



Colleges and universities that embrace and enforce AAUP academic freedom guidelines generally follow its recommendations on tenure and governance.

area of academic expertise. A key takeaway from the third point is the principle that academic freedom also involves “academic responsibility” or the “special obligations” of a teacher, who represents his or her academic institution, department, and discipline even when not speaking on their behalf. Quoting its professional ethics standards,

³⁴ AAUP, *1940 Statement of Principles*, 14.

the AAUP notes that “as members of their community, professors have the rights and obligations of other citizens” and must “measure the urgency of these obligations in the light of their responsibilities to their subject, to their students, to their profession, and to their institution.”³⁵

Purpose of Tenure and Faculty Governance

As useful as the aforementioned principles are for understanding basic boundaries, the AAUP has never asserted that academic freedom can be preserved simply by assenting to those principles. Instead, the association has promoted necessary administrative supports for academic freedom such as robust forms of academic tenure and faculty governance. Colleges and universities that embrace and enforce AAUP academic freedom guidelines generally follow its recommendations on tenure and governance.

Faculty tenure is addressed and defined directly in the *Statement of Principles* as follows: “After the expiration of a probationary period, teachers or investigators should have permanent or continuous tenure, and their service should be terminated only for adequate cause, except in the case of retirement for age, or under extraordinary circumstances because of financial exigencies.”³⁶ According to the AAUP guidelines, “precise terms and conditions” must be agreed upon by both professor and institution prior to a faculty member

Tenure requirements ensure that faculty members cannot be dismissed arbitrarily or without due process.

being appointed, and the probationary period must not extend longer than seven years. Furthermore, a decision not to grant tenure must be communicated to the faculty member no later than twelve months prior to the conclusion of the probationary period, and academic freedom protections must exist for probationary, and not just tenured, faculty. Consequently, faculty who are denied tenure should receive a one-year terminal contract, which provides adequate time to seek employment elsewhere. It is important to note that these guidelines apply to full-time, but not part-time, faculty members.³⁷

In sum, tenure requirements ensure that faculty members cannot be dismissed arbitrarily or without due process. This provision renders ad hoc violation of a professor’s academic freedom much more difficult. The *Principles* expect that faculty will enjoy academic freedom protections during the pre-tenure probationary period (which cannot be prolonged indefinitely) and robust protection from termination after they are granted tenure.

³⁵ AAUP, 1940 *Statement of Principles*, 15.

³⁶ AAUP, 1940 *Statement of Principles*, 15.

³⁷ AAUP, 1940 *Statement of Principles*, 15. Note also that in some cases institutions may shorten their probationary period to account for a new hire’s accumulated years of service completed at a previous institution.

Within an institution of higher education, who should be responsible for making decisions about tenure and the exercise of academic freedom? The AAUP places this responsibility primarily in the hands of the faculty. Their 1966 *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* addresses the issue of faculty governance and directly links the assertion that faculty should have a role in institutional governance to notions of academic freedom and faculty tenure found in the 1940 *Statement of Principles*.³⁸ AAUP's desired roles for faculty in institutional governance are presented succinctly in the 1966 document, the core provisions of which are summarized as follows.

First, an institution's faculty should hold the main responsibility for curricular decisions, subject content, modes of instruction, research methods and priorities, program requirements, and degree authorization. They should also be partially responsible for areas of student life that bear directly on the educational process. Trustees and other senior officials should intervene and overrule faculty in these areas rarely and only in consultation with faculty, who should be given ample opportunity to communicate directly with the trustees and senior officials about these proposed interventions. Considerations such as budgets, time constraints, and the need to meet requirements of accreditation bodies, government policies, and so on can legitimately overrule faculty in such cases.

An institution's faculty should hold the main responsibility for curricular decisions, subject content, modes of instruction, research methods and priorities, program requirements, and degree authorization.

Second, "faculty status and related matters are primarily a faculty responsibility; this area includes appointments, reappointments, decisions not to reappoint, promotions, the granting of tenure, and dismissal."³⁹ Once again, it is expected that overruling such decisions by trustees or senior officials should only be done on rare occasions. Reversal of decisions related to faculty status or academic rank should only occur if and when there have been opportunities for faculty to communicate with trustees and senior officials about said reversal.

Third, "the faculty should actively participate in the determination of policies and procedures governing salary increases."⁴⁰ Faculty do not have the right to determine their own salaries, but they should be consulted regarding compensation in meaningful ways.

³⁸ AAUP, *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, 1960, rev. 1990, <https://www.aaup.org/report/statement-government-colleges-and-universities>.

³⁹ AAUP, *Statement on Governance of Colleges and Universities*, 5.3.

⁴⁰ AAUP, *Statement on Governance of Colleges and Universities*, 5.4.

First Amendment protections and academic freedom are not the same thing.

Finally, various committees and agencies should be established to ensure faculty participation in all of the above areas. Moreover, an agency must exist to present the views of the whole faculty to the college administration and trustees, such as a “faculty senate,” and the faculty should be consulted regarding the structuring and rules of such agencies. This includes faculty involvement in establishing procedures for selecting faculty representatives to these bodies.

Thus, the AAUP regards faculty governance in accordance with these guidelines, along with provisions for academic tenure, as essential to safeguarding what they regard as proper academic freedom. This perspective was further addressed in a 1994 document titled *On the Relationship of Faculty Governance to Academic Freedom*.⁴¹ In it, the AAUP asserted that “a sound system of institutional governance is a necessary condition for the protection of faculty rights and thereby for the most productive exercise of essential faculty freedoms. Correspondingly, the protection of the academic freedom of faculty members in addressing issues of institutional governance is a prerequisite for the practice of governance unhampered by fear of retribution.” This includes faculty members being able to voice their opinions about governance issues freely.



“[T]he faculty’s voice should be authoritative across the entire range of decision making that bears, whether directly or indirectly, on its responsibilities [Therefore] it is also essential that faculty members have the academic freedom to express their professional opinions without fear of reprisal.”⁴²

Relationship to the First Amendment

The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, which prohibits laws “abridging the freedom of speech” among others, has certainly shaped the understanding and practice of academic freedom in the United States.

⁴¹ The AAUP’s *On the Relationship of Faculty Governance to Academic Freedom* is available online at <https://www.aaup.org/report/relationship-faculty-governance-academic-freedom>.

⁴² AAUP, *On the Relationship of Faculty Governance to Academic Freedom*, par. 7.

For example, when a robust notion of academic freedom was imported into the United States from Germany, it included the uniquely American understanding that such freedoms should include being able to publicly criticize societal institutions such as the government and military.⁴³ Additionally, in their legal reasoning, courts have somewhat tied their protection of academic freedom to First Amendment guarantees.⁴⁴

However, First Amendment protections and academic freedom are not the same thing, as should be clear from the wording of the third principle of academic freedom previously quoted from the AAUP 1940 *Statement of Principles*. Despite this, as eminent Yale law professor Robert Post noted in an address at Columbia University Law School in 2016, many American faculty believe that their right to free speech as citizens is the same.⁴⁵

Post argues, however, that “First Amendment rights are individual, but academic freedom applies to a discipline [and] the right of the discipline is not to be judged by those outside the discipline. The most basic point about academic freedom is that I, as a professor, can only be judged by my peers.”⁴⁶ Thus, as

Court decisions loosely tying the First Amendment to academic freedom protections apply only to public, not private, college and university contexts.

a citizen, an astronomer can publish articles claiming that the sun revolves around the earth without going to jail. Yet he or she cannot expect the First Amendment to serve as a shield from potential consequences levied by professional colleagues in the academic discipline or at his or her home institution.

It is also critical to note that court decisions loosely tying the First Amendment to academic freedom protections apply only to public, not private, college and university contexts. Discussions of the relationship between the two, convoluted and contested as they are, are not relevant to private institutions, including Christian colleges. As AAUP senior counsel Rachel Levinson concisely pointed out, “The First Amendment applies only to governmental actors.”⁴⁷

⁴³ Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 67.

⁴⁴ Levinson, “Academic Freedom and the First Amendment,” 2.

⁴⁵ Robert Post, as summarized in Columbia Law School, “Academic Freedom Is Not a First Amendment Right for University Employees, Cautioned Yale Law School Dean Robert Post, in a Speech at Columbia Law School,” March 7, 2016, par. 1, <https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/free-speech-and-academic-freedom>.

⁴⁶ Post, as quoted in “Academic Freedom,” par. 18.

⁴⁷ Levinson, “Academic Freedom and the First Amendment,” 1.



The Christian College Difference

How do Christian colleges and universities differ from their secular peers with respect to the grounds and practice of academic freedom? What are the distinctive characteristics that set these institutions apart from the rest of American higher education? What key principles must one keep in mind when assessing the Christian college landscape? Christian college leaders must accomplish three consequential tasks in order to maintain robust standards for academic freedom within the context of their religious missions: define the educative enterprise within confessional boundaries,

balance individual freedoms with institutional commitments, and maintain missional integrity amidst external pressures.

Teaching and Learning within Confessional Boundaries

Within Christian colleges and universities, academic freedom will naturally exist within different boundaries than we would find in public—and most private—institutions of higher education. If a college or university's mission includes imparting a comprehensive Christian worldview, engaging in faith-learning integration across all academic disciplines, and forming students' morals and character according to Christian precepts, then there must be some basic

The Christian college difference is *not* that academic freedom is qualified at Christian colleges and universities but limitless in their secular counterparts.

doctrinal and ethical boundaries that all faculty, staff, and administrators respect. There must also be means for upholding those boundaries and enforcing them throughout the personnel processes of hiring, evaluation, promotion, and retention.

The Christian college difference is *not* that academic freedom is qualified at Christian colleges and universities but limitless in their secular counterparts. As has already been demonstrated, academic freedom is always qualified, regardless of the institutional context.⁴⁸ Simply put, the difference is that in institutions of Christian higher education, academic freedom is qualified *in alternative ways*. Summarizing “three scholars ... who concurred independently” about academic freedom at Christian versus other colleges, Ringenberg noted that “every college, religious or secular, operates with self-definitions and thus boundaries within which they work. There is no school where ‘anything goes.’”⁴⁹

Likewise, the difference is not that all public and most private institutions of higher education value free inquiry in the classroom and in research, as well as freedom of speech in extramural life, while those pursuing Christian faith-learning integration and moral and spiritual formation do not. It is that, at their best, Christian colleges and universities wish to work out the implications of Christian revelation, deeply and fully, for every area of life, for all of reality. And their mission includes encouraging this rich inquiry, rooted in Christian doctrine and ethics, not only within the faculty, but also among the student body.

Moreover, the Christian college difference is not necessarily whether faculty may critically explore a range of competing ideas, including many that are deeply challenging or even antithetical to historic Christian doctrine and ethics. Rather, the difference is that when these topics are explored within Christian colleges and universities, faculty do so upon a foundation—and within the boundaries—of shared Christian beliefs. In fact, one should not expect that Christian colleges and universities will never have diversity of viewpoint or even sharp differences of professional opinion among their faculty members. The doctrinal and ethical boundaries within these institutions are typically not so tight that they eliminate the coexistence of multiple perspectives within and across academic disciplines. Here

⁴⁸ This point is powerfully articulated by eminent Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff in his “Ivory Tower or Holy Mountain: Faith and Academic Freedom,” *Academe* 87, no. 1 (2001): 17-22.

⁴⁹ Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 90.

Commitment to orthodoxy conditions—but does not compete with—academic freedom.

is how one Christian college explained the nature and role of academic freedom within the bounds of confessional commitments:

Confessional commitments and academic freedom are indispensable and interdependent elements which shape our ecology for Christian teaching and learning ... The confessions which bound our academic freedom arise out of and serve the lordship of Jesus Christ [and] offer a set of both orienting convictions and boundaries in which academic freedom is exercised ... The confessions have two primary functions with respect to academic freedom: a centering and a boundary function.⁵⁰

In other words, confessional expectations serve not only to bound but also to enable, inspire, and focus scholarly inquiry and instruction; commitment to orthodoxy conditions—but does not compete with—academic freedom.

Balancing Individual Freedoms and Institutional Commitments

Every Christian college will embrace certain doctrinal boundaries for its educative enterprise. In spite of the commonality these boundaries foster, balancing academic freedom and shared faith commitments will never be simple or easy. There are three basic reasons for this reality.

First, Christian colleges and universities will invariably differ in how strictly institutional commitments are defined and enforced and in how much personal latitude is given. Those favoring more doctrinal latitude tend to denigrate those who are more doctrinally specific and strict, often on the grounds that they are too intellectually constrained. For example, one prominent evangelical scholar described more doctrinally specific Christian colleges and universities as “advanced Sunday School” with “a relatively high degree of indoctrination and a relatively low degree of intellectual exploration.”⁵¹ Meanwhile, institutions where faculty have more freedom to question official doctrinal and ethical standards, or where those standards are defined more minimally or vaguely, are

Every Christian college will embrace certain doctrinal boundaries for its educative enterprise.

⁵⁰ Calvin College, *Confessional Commitment and Academic Freedom: Principles and Practices at Calvin College* (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College, 2016), 7-8, 16, <https://calvin.edu/sites/default/files/2024-08/confessional-commitment-and-academic-freedom.pdf>.

⁵¹ George Marsden, speaking at a 2009 forum on academic freedom at Calvin College, as quoted in Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 90.

Even when a Christian college is crystal clear in its policies, balancing individual freedoms and institutional commitments will often manifest as a dynamic process that requires constant effort, wisdom, and discretion.

often criticized by those of stricter dispositions as succumbing to liberalism, wokeness, or institutional mission drift.

The point here is not to defend one or another approach in balancing academic freedom and doctrinal boundaries. Nor is it to deny that over-privileging either one can be problematic for the institutions, their employees, and the people they serve. The point is simply to observe that Christian colleges and universities will occupy different places on this continuum and thus to emphasize the importance of intentionality in clearly staking out an institution's position. Moreover, constituents throughout Christian higher education—including students, parents, alumni, faculty, and staff—should acknowledge where their institution falls on this continuum and adjust their expectations accordingly. For their part, trustees and senior administrators at Christian colleges and universities should be transparent about how the institution balances academic freedom and doctrinal commitments in order to prevent false expectations and harmful misunderstandings.



Second, even when a Christian college sets clear boundaries and guidelines for exercising academic freedom in the context of its own doctrinal commitments, individual cases can be puzzling and complex. For example, whether a faculty member's pronouncement on something like a new scientific theory, an evolving social norm, or a vexing theological issue violates a school's doctrinal standards is not always clear, even in situations where the boundaries appear explicit. Ringenberg provides numerous case studies that illustrate both the challenges that can be involved in applying principles of academic freedom and the areas where disputes most frequently



arise in the Christian college context: debates about human origins and issues surrounding sexual and gender identity.⁵²

Third, the varied nature of a Christian college's constituency—both in position and perspective—means that different subgroups are likely to approach academic freedom and doctrinal boundaries in divergent ways, both generally and with respect to specific cases. For example, the professional goals of those approaching donors, balancing budgets, recruiting students, and teaching in the classroom vary significantly, such that the priorities of several groups within the same institution can be at odds. Moreover, even those within the same subgroups will often

From its founding, the AAUP has historically not been very supportive of the religious boundaries on academic freedom maintained by Christian colleges and universities.

disagree, sometimes sharply. For this reason, even when a Christian college is crystal clear in its policies, balancing individual freedoms and institutional commitments will often manifest as a dynamic process that requires constant effort, wisdom, and discretion.

Maintaining Institutional Integrity amidst External Pressures

From its founding, the AAUP has historically not been very supportive of the religious boundaries on academic freedom maintained by Christian colleges and universities. As we saw earlier, one sentence in the 1940 *Statement of Principles* declared that such “limitations on academic freedom” are acceptable, provided they are “clearly stated in writing at the time of the appointment.” However, the 1970 interpretative comments largely reject even this allowance, asserting, “Most church-related institutions no longer need or desire the departure from the principle of academic freedom implied in the 1940 ‘Statement,’ and we do not now endorse such a departure” (emphasis added).⁵³ At face

⁵² For examples and analyses of such disputes, see Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 131-171.

⁵³ AAUP, *1940 Statement of Principles*, 14.

Christian colleges and universities benefit from establishing a strong rationale and culture of properly qualified academic freedom within their institutions before a challenge to specific practices arises.

value, the 1970 interpretation undermines the 1940 allowances. In fact, for many years the AAUP has treated religious colleges that provide doctrinal boundaries to academic freedom as “inherently inferior.”⁵⁴ Although many Christian colleges and universities continue to work with the AAUP on academic freedom disputes, relying on the brief religious exception clause in the *1940 Statement of Principles*, the relationship between the AAUP and Christian colleges remains characterized by considerable differences that, at times, can produce tension and conflict.

This bias against Christian colleges and universities’ approach to academic freedom is shared by a significant number of faculty who work outside of Christian higher education. In a 2001 symposium on academic freedom in religious colleges, one Christian college professor observed that “many academics, including many members of the AAUP, would deem it inappropriate” to apply his institution’s doctrinal standards as criteria for evaluating faculty performance.⁵⁵ Indeed,

a similar perspective is likely held by most of the professional scholarly associations that endorse the AAUP guidelines as well as most of the secular media, including higher education publications, and the more progressive outlets in the religious media. Consequently, it is difficult for Christian colleges to discipline errant faculty members, even in cases of egregious violations of doctrinal standards, without suffering significant negative publicity and pressure from both the press and the wider academy. In such moments, Christian colleges and universities benefit by being absolutely clear regarding their policies of academic freedom, their doctrinal and ethical boundaries of it, and being consistent and just in applying both. They also benefit from establishing a strong rationale and culture of properly qualified academic freedom within their institutions *before* a challenge to specific practices arises.

⁵⁴ Ringenberg, *The Christian College*, 84.

⁵⁵ George N. Monsma, Jr. “Faith and Faculty Autonomy at Calvin College,” *Academe* 87, no. 1 (2001): 44.



Building and Protecting Distinctly Christian Academic Communities

For the sake of their religious missions, it is essential that Christian colleges and universities maintain both healthy academic freedom and Christian doctrinal and ethical boundaries. Every institution of higher education ought to have competent legal counsel in establishing the necessary provisions in their contracts and policies that define these boundaries and in applying any corrective measures based on them. In addition, institutions should follow a series of time-honored practices relating to academic freedom.

First, whether through providing a public set of faith standards or through tying expectations for faculty and any applicable staff to those of the institution's sponsoring church or denomination, boundaries must

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be clear and explicit. Vague, secret, or non-existent doctrinal expectations will not suffice, as they are difficult to enforce both legally and ethically. Faculty and applicable staff should formally acknowledge and agree to remain within these boundaries, such that they also agree in advance to the potential consequences of violating them.

Second, as with any other private college or university, academic freedom policies in Christian institutions of higher education ought to be explicit and binding for all faculty and applicable staff from the moment of employment. This should include transparent, uniform due process for handling dismissal or other consequences of confirmed violation of the above boundaries. Academic freedom policies need to strike a balance between, on the one hand, protecting faculty and applicable staff from unjust, arbitrary enforcement and, on the other hand, empowering the institution to deal with those who have violated its doctrinal and ethical boundaries. This recalls the dialogue explored above between the academic freedom of an individual and that of an institution: both are crucial.

Both the first and second recommendations must be addressed through official institutional policy; common examples include “institutional rules and regulations, letters of appointment, faculty handbooks, and, where applicable, collective bargaining agreement.”⁵⁶ In addition to the previously mentioned legal and ethical mandates for



providing clear, official campus policy, public witness and institutional integrity should also be taken into consideration. As Wolterstorff has noted, “unjust infringements on academic freedom” are not unknown in Christian colleges and universities, where they occur they undermine the public witness of these institutions, and “almost always, it is in the procedure, not in the qualifications ... that the injustice lies.”⁵⁷ However, Christian colleges and universities can err in the other direction by refusing to enforce doctrinal standards they have publicly committed to upholding. Christian integrity requires real enforcement of stated boundaries,

⁵⁶ Levinson, “Academic Freedom and the First Amendment,” 3.

⁵⁷ Wolterstorff, “Ivory Tower,” 22.

The job of balancing academic freedom with doctrinal boundaries in the service of institutional mission and, more broadly, the church, is too important to be left in the hands of only one—admittedly vital—segment of the academic community.

and public witness is bolstered when such boundaries are maintained in ways that are wise and just in their substance and process.

Third, recall that the AAUP statements on academic freedom have been accompanied by their recommended policies for both academic tenure and academic governance. How should Christian colleges and universities approach these aspects of institutional culture?

There are numerous reasons a Christian college may or may not offer tenure, as Harris, Lumsden, and Mahurin pointed out in a series of empirical studies of tenure practices at member institutions of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCCU). Among those reasons is a concern with maintaining doctrinal boundaries necessary

to facilitate the integration of faith and learning across all disciplines. As the authors note, “academic freedom issues related to the school’s doctrinal statement are often at the heart of the tenure debate,” and “often Christian schools receive harsh rebuke from academe for their apparent limitations placed on academic freedom.”⁵⁸ The authors observe that when CCCU institutions do offer tenure to their faculty members, it operates “within the confines of the doctrinal statement of the school” and comes with a “condition providing adequate cause for termination” for “holding beliefs that are outside of the accepted traditional Christian beliefs of the particular school in question,” which the authors term “confessional unorthodoxy.”⁵⁹ The authors found that 68 percent of the 65 institutions they examined offered tenure to faculty, and these institutions tended to be larger in size.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the remainder—roughly a third—did not offer tenure to faculty, typically opting for term contract systems instead. These colleges tended to be smaller in size.⁶¹

Christian colleges and universities need to consider many factors in deciding whether to offer tenure, term contracts, or something in between (for example, having tenure- and non-tenure tracks or establishing longer-term contracts for professors with greater seniority). There is no one-size-fits-all option that should be adopted everywhere and in all cases. The

58 Scott Harris, D. Barry Lumsden, and Ron Mahurin, “Tenure Policies and Practices of American Evangelical Colleges and Universities Part 1: Introduction,” *Christian Higher Education* 5, no. 33 (2006): 289-90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363750600688682>.

59 Harris, Lumsden, and Mahurin, “Tenure Policies and Practices,” 290.

60 Scott Harris and D. Barry Lumsden, “Tenure Policies and Practices of American Evangelical Colleges and Universities. Part 2: Institutions Granting Tenure,” *Christian Higher Education* 5, no. 4 (2006): 342, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363750600932916>.

61 Scott Harris and D. Barry Lumsden, “Tenure Policies and Practices of American Evangelical Colleges and Universities: Part 3: Schools Not Granting Tenure,” *Christian Higher Education* 6, no. 1 (2007): 4-5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363750601094278>.

Healthy, vibrant Christian colleges and universities enrich American academic life and produce a multitude of benefits.

key is finding the best contract arrangement to establish protections for academic freedom as well as doctrinal boundaries that suit the mission of the institution.

Finally, there is the matter of faculty governance, which the AAUP advocates should be extensive and potent, and which it connects strongly to protecting academic freedom. Muscular faculty governance can, at the practical level, prove to be an impediment to terminating faculty who have violated doctrinal boundaries, even seriously so, or who have made doctrinally motivated changes to courses or curriculum. Certainly, following the “letter of the law” with AAUP governance guidelines could prevent administrators or trustees from making desired changes if faculty resisted them. Regardless, there are a variety of approaches to defining faculty governance across Christian colleges and universities, many of which give trustees and administrators much larger roles than one typically finds in secular institutions.⁶² With regard to trustees, Smith has observed:

The trustee form of governance is defined by loyalty to the purpose for which the organization was created. It inevitably leads to concern with the history of the

organization which should become what Robert Bellah and his colleagues called a ‘community of memory’ ... The trustee is always constrained in some way by the will of the founder or by the purpose for which the organization was created.⁶³

The job of balancing academic freedom with doctrinal boundaries in the service of institutional mission and, more broadly, the church, is too important to be left in the hands of only one—admittedly vital—segment of the academic community. In addition to the faculty, a college’s trustees, administrators, alumni, donors, and students all have an investment in preventing mission drift while preserving academic freedom as well. To be sure, each group has its own interests and perspectives, yet each deserves to be heard. Though models of governance may vary, in every case it is important to engage the full range of viewpoints and to pursue community-wide buy-in to a shared set of values.

Healthy, vibrant Christian colleges and universities enrich American academic life and produce a multitude of benefits. Their importance, far from diminishing, heightens as the voices they represent become increasingly dissident ones in the emergent post-Christian

⁶² In comparing what she calls the few “faithful Catholic colleges” with what has become more the norm among Catholic colleges and universities today, which are heavily secularized, Anne Hendershott has highlighted the degree to which strong faculty governance is associated with the latter, while the former empower administrators and trustees to enforce doctrinal parameters much more, in her *A Lamp in the Darkness: How Faithful Catholic Colleges Are Helping to Save the Church* (Nashua, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2024). See, for example, 238–9, 259.

⁶³ David H. Smith, *Entrusted: The Moral Responsibilities of Trusteeship* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 5, as quoted in Hendershott, *A Lamp in the Darkness*, 259.



era. It is essential that these institutions be preserved and defended rather than stifled through a monochrome, sublimated, or tacit approach to academic freedom. This will require maintaining healthy individual academic freedom within these institutions,⁶⁴ but it will be equally important that they enjoy robust institutional academic freedom as well. That means they must be free to function, without apology, within the doctrinal and moral parameters of their faith traditions. When these institutions are forced to conform

to secular norms and are no longer free to protect and defend the boundaries proscribed by their respective faith traditions, they cease to be the Christian colleges and universities that they were founded to be. Moreover, when an institution voluntarily chooses to refrain from enforcing these boundaries—a story repeated throughout the history of American higher education—it likewise loses its founding character. Institutional leaders who care about the future of Christian higher education would be wise to watch for both pitfalls. 🏰

⁶⁴ Again, as Robert Post has noted, within specific disciplines given responsibility over scholarship within them, within which peers are judged by peers.

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