

**Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
Academic Freedom & Freedom of Expression
Frequently Asked Questions**

This document is designed to answer common questions about academic freedom, free speech, and freedom of expression in an academic environment. It's a living document and will be revisited regularly. If you have additional questions or would like to suggest updates to this FAQ, please contact Jennifer Ivers, Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, at ivers@hsph.harvard.edu. (Please note that this document does cover a lot of ground, so we encourage you to read through all the sections before reaching out to suggest additions.)

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

What is academic freedom as applied to faculty?

Academic freedom means that researchers and instructors—indeed all Harvard Chan School academic appointees, regardless of their tenure status—have the freedom to investigate, write, publish, teach, and speak about issues in their field of expertise without interference from politicians, donors, funders, trustees, board members, School leadership, or others in positions of power. They can expect critical scrutiny of their academic scholarship from peers but are protected from other forms of pressure.

Academic freedom also ensures that academic appointees can speak freely about the governance of their own institution without fear of retaliation.

The goal is to protect the free exchange of ideas and scholarship, even when they are controversial. Harvard University considers academic freedom an essential value, as noted in the [University-Wide Statement on Rights and Responsibilities](#).

Are students covered by academic freedom?

Students have a form of academic freedom. They have the right to express their views in the classroom, including the right to challenge or disagree with course material — what the [American Association of University Professors](#) calls the right “to take reasoned exception to the data or views offered” in the course. They can also register concerns about course content with their departmental curriculum committee or the [Harvard Chan Committee on Educational Policy](#). Students do *not*, however, have the right to opt out of learning course material, or demonstrating that learning on exams and assignments.

Like faculty, students have the right to critique their academic institutions and to express their views as private citizens on matters unrelated to their coursework. They have the right to expect that these expressions will not affect their grades; their academic performance must be evaluated strictly on their demonstrated mastery of the course material.

The School and University do have the right to set policies regarding the time and manner of certain forms of expression, which can impose limits on students' freedom. Students do not, for instance, have the right to noisily disrupt a class or drown out a guest speaker with protest chants. The Harvard Chan [student handbook](#) spells out detailed guidelines for protest and dissent that seek to support free expression without compromising the School's core educational and research missions.

Does academic freedom mean that faculty and students can say what they want without consequence?

Academic freedom protects faculty and students from retaliation for expressing their views, but it does not insulate them from critique—even intense, sustained critique—of those views.

Protected speech may at times collide with other deeply held values of our community, such as inclusivity and belonging. As such, it may draw strong critiques, spark intense debates, or generate sustained protest. Strong academic institutions make space for this type of debate, which is reflective of a healthy diversity of viewpoints.

The norm in any academic institution, and the firm expectation at Harvard Chan School, is that controversial speech should be challenged on its substance, through evidence-based debates—not with attacks on the character of the speaker or with calls for coercive or administrative consequences from the School. Such debates should be robust, but always civil. And they should be grounded in an understanding of the principles of academic freedom, which protect faculty and students from disciplinary action for expressing their views on academic matters, as long as they do not violate university policies on [discrimination, bullying](#), and [sexual harassment](#).

Are there limits on academic freedom?

Yes. For instance, academic appointees must follow professional guidelines on ethics as well as all applicable laws and regulations when conducting research.

They may need to submit a proposed course to a program or departmental review committee before getting approval to teach it. And they are not free to teach material that would be deemed categorically false by their academic peers.

In addition, all members of the Harvard community must adhere to the [University's policies](#) on bullying, discrimination, and harassment.

Finally, academic freedom does not excuse academic appointees from having to comply with administrative processes or practices adopted for the orderly operation of the School.

Does academic freedom apply to non-academic speech?

Traditionally, the principle of academic freedom has also covered the right of students and academic appointees to speak freely as private citizens without fear of censorship or discipline from their institution.

The Harvard Chan School firmly upholds this right. It also urges all members of the community to use this right responsibly by exercising free speech rights as private citizens with integrity, honesty, accuracy, and respect. In addition, members of the community, especially academic appointees whose titles may carry considerable weight in the public eye, should make clear they are not speaking for the University, their School, or any Harvard department, laboratory, center, or office when they speak out in their capacity as private citizens.

Does academic freedom always work as intended?

Unfortunately, the power dynamics inherent in academic institutions as well as the external pressures involved with funding and career advancement can make some academic appointees reluctant to pursue specific research, express their views about the institution, or publicly criticize tenured faculty, senior faculty, and/or School leadership, even though academic freedom protects their right to do so.

Students also often feel they are in a vulnerable position and thus may not be comfortable exercising their right to free expression, either inside or outside the classroom. For instance, they may be concerned that challenging faculty or administrators on campus—or sharing controversial views as private citizens—could harm their chances for academic success and career advancement.

Harvard Chan School is committed to supporting community members who seek to address and defuse these power dynamics and training others to do so as well.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND USE OF A HARVARD TITLE

Is it appropriate for academic appointees to reference their Harvard Chan School affiliation in forums such as petitions, letters to the editor, op-eds, amicus briefs, protests, and community meetings *on topics related to their field of study*?

Yes, for identification purposes or as needed to describe their work at the School, provided that it is clear they are not speaking for the University or the School.

What about using their Harvard Chan School affiliation in petitions, op-eds, amicus briefs, community forums, etc. *when the topic does not relate to their field of study*?

This is perfectly acceptable. Academic freedom protects the right of academic appointees (as well as students) to speak out as private citizens.

However, the Harvard Chan School strongly recommends that academic appointees clearly state that they are speaking not as scholars, but as private citizens, when commenting on matters outside their field of study. They should also be careful to make clear that their views are their own, and do not reflect any official institutional position.

Note that academic appointees can also choose *not* to use their Harvard Chan School title and affiliation when speaking out.

Can academic appointees and students reference their affiliation when critiquing the administration or policies of Harvard Chan School or Harvard University?

Yes. This is a well-defined right within the umbrella of academic freedom.

Is it appropriate for academic appointees and students to use their Harvard Chan School affiliation in their bios on social media?

Yes. The School strongly recommends that they also include a statement that makes clear they are not speaking on behalf of the institution. For more information, see the University's [Guidelines for Using Social Media](#).

Are there any limitations on use of the Harvard Chan School affiliation?

All members of the Harvard community must adhere to the University's [Use of Names and Insignias policy](#). Among other principles, it requires Harvard affiliates to use accurate titles to represent their current roles.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE CLASSROOM

In the classroom, can faculty share political, ideological, religious, or other personal views not related to their field of study or the content of the course?

Faculty do have a right to share their personal views, but they should consider how doing so can impact classroom dynamics—both in that discussion and throughout the course—and be clear about their goals for, and the academic value of, sharing such views. Among such considerations is the fact that there are unequal power dynamics in a classroom setting. When faculty share their political, ideological, religious, or other personal views beyond the academic content of a class, those views could be experienced as an endorsement or could have a chilling effect on student participation.

For resources about best pedagogical practices and navigating classroom dynamics see [Harvard Graduate School of Education Instructional Resources](#), [FAS's Derek Bok Center](#), and [Teaching and Learning at Harvard Chan](#).

Does academic freedom give faculty the right to invite any speaker of their choosing into the classroom?

Yes, instructors may invite any speaker, as long as those speakers conduct themselves professionally, behave respectfully, and do not harass, bully, or discriminate against anyone.

Faculty should also consider other approaches for introducing multiple perspectives on a given topic, such as setting up a mock debate in class with students assigned to represent different perspectives; bringing in a panel of individuals who represent varied perspectives; or showing a video offering a different point of view, followed by class discussion.

Both faculty and students are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner in the classroom, consistent with relevant [School and University policies](#).

If a speaker in the classroom or elsewhere on campus is expected to draw protests, organizers of the talk should speak with School leadership and the Harvard University Police Department well in advance to ensure time for adequate planning to protect safety and prevent disruption of the School's regular operations. And those organizing the protests should be mindful of the School's [guidelines on dissent and protest](#).

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND INCLUSIVITY

How might the community expect School leadership to respond to speech that is protected, but that upsets or offends members of the community?

As a community, we strive to provide support to and facilitate dialogue among all individuals affected by any controversy surrounding free speech.

In addition, the Harvard Chan School seeks to provide students (as well as faculty and staff) with the skills they need to engage in substantive and respectful discussion with individuals who hold very different world views. These skills are essential both for a vibrant academic community and for public health leadership in the wider world.

Given protections provided to faculty under academic freedom, what is their responsibility to ensure an inclusive research, teaching, and/or learning environment?

Academic appointees are expected to ensure an inclusive environment.

More specifically, they must adhere to all School and University policies. These include policies related to non-discrimination, bullying, research integrity, Title IX, research collaboration and co-authorship, outside activities, confidentiality of student records, and many more.

It's important to note that even when a single incident may not rise to the level of a policy violation, an accumulation of such incidents may damage the environment for research, teaching, and/or learning.

Individuals who feel they have been harmed by such incidents should consult the office that manages related policies (e.g., Human Resources, Student Affairs, Faculty Affairs, Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Office of Regulatory Affairs and Research Compliance, etc.) to begin a conversation about how to address their experiences, either formally or informally.

How far are students—and other members of the community—permitted to go in protesting statements that are protected by academic freedom?

Our [guidelines for protest and dissent](#) are spelled out in the student handbook.

Students should be mindful of other policies that may intersect with their rights to protest. For instance, they have a free speech right to walk out of class, but they should understand that this could affect their grades under the School's attendance policy.

Members of the community should also be mindful of our institutional values, which hold that ideas should be debated on their merits and protests should not devolve into personal attacks or derogatory language or insinuations about the speaker. Students should be mindful that disagreement—even intense disagreement that rises to the level of offense or alienation due to the content of a speaker's expression—does not entitle them to disrupt a speaker or otherwise interfere with members of the School in the performance of their normal duties and activities.

What if a member of the community believes that certain types of speech constitute bullying or harassment?

All members of the Harvard University community must adhere to the new [University Policies on Non-Discrimination and Anti-Bullying](#), as well as [policies on sexual harassment](#) and other forms of misconduct. We urge all members of the School community to acquaint themselves with the standards expressed in these Policies, including in particular the definitions of discrimination and bullying and the Anti-Bullying Policy's commentary on academic freedom:

This Policy should also be construed within the context of the University's enduring commitment to academic freedom and free inquiry, and the conception of the University as a place that must encourage reasoned dissent and the free exchange of ideas, beliefs, and opinions, however unpopular. This Policy is not intended to constrain the freedom of Harvard community members to engage in academic disagreements or to discuss controversial matters, criticize the administration or University policies, or take part in political protest.

Anti-Bullying Policy at 13-14.

Members of the community can make complaints through the processes established by the University and the School; those complaints will be reviewed and adjudicated through the established protocols.

HISTORY OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Where did the concept of academic freedom originate?

The concept has been around for centuries, but its most well-known and widely adopted articulation for academic appointees is contained in the [Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#) endorsed by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities in 1940.

In 1967, the AAUP and numerous other academic bodies issued a [Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students](#), which covers academic freedom and free expression for students.

THREATS TO ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Why do some academics believe that academic freedom is under threat?

Some faculty are concerned that the divisive political climate in the U.S. has contributed to self-censorship: *i.e.*, that academics may be reluctant to research and/or write on controversial issues for fear of sparking criticism on social media and beyond. They may also be reluctant to assign readings, invite speakers, or launch classroom discussions that could generate a backlash on campus.

In addition, some state legislatures have sought to regulate the content of academic instruction at public colleges and universities within their jurisdictions, particularly on matters that are politically controversial. And some funders may explicitly or implicitly seek to direct outcomes of research they support.

Students, like faculty, may feel uneasy about generating a backlash by speaking out, especially if they hold viewpoints that put them in a minority in their institution. Students may also have the added concern that challenging faculty or administrators at their institution could harm their chances for career advancement by making it harder for them to get good letters of recommendation or prestigious opportunities on campus.

What is the status of academic freedom at Harvard?

The Harvard Crimson [surveyed](#) the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on this and other questions in 2023 and received 386 responses. Among respondents, who may not be a representative sample, nearly 76% said academic freedom is under threat in America. However, 61% said Harvard puts appropriate emphasis on academic freedom.

In April 2023, more than 90 faculty members from across Harvard University formed a new [Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard](#), with the goal of defending academic freedom, free speech, and rational discourse.

The University's long-standing [University-Wide Statement on Rights and Responsibilities](#) articulates Harvard's vision of institutional and community-wide support for open and constructive academic discourse. We urge all members of our community to read and consider the *University-Wide Statement*.

RELATED CONCEPTS

What's the difference between academic freedom, free speech, and free expression?

Academic freedom primarily refers to the right of academic appointees to research, publish, and teach within their area of expertise. It also covers their right to speak out on other matters as private citizens without fear of retribution from the university. As noted in this document, students are also covered in some respects by academic freedom.

Free speech is a legal concept: The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects written and spoken speech, as well as expressive conduct (such as burning a flag) from interference by the government. There are some limitations here: Government can impose some restrictions on the "time, place, and manner" of speech, for instance by requiring permits for a protest march, and certain forms of expression may fall outside the protection of the First Amendment and be subject to regulation, such as defamation, disclosure of classified information, speech that incites violence, and legal obscenity.

In addition, the First Amendment does not apply to private companies or institutions, including private universities such as Harvard.

Freedom of expression is the broad principle that human beings have the right to speak their views. It's incorporated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a fundamental human right. It's important to note that certain forms of expression may be unlawful, such as slander, disclosure of classified information, or incitement to violence.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [FAQ on academic freedom](#) from the American Association of University Professors, which provided useful material for this FAQ
- [Campus Free Expression: A New Roadmap](#), a report from the Bipartisan Policy Center
- Harvard's [University-Wide Statement on Rights and Responsibilities](#)
- The faculty-led [Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard](#)
- Lancet correspondence on the need for [ethical standards](#) for academic behavior

- [AP article](#) on a group of universities seeking to elevate free expression on campus
- AAUP statement on [collegiality as a criterion](#) for faculty evaluation
- Presentation on [bullying and incivility](#) in the academic workplace
- Explorations of [academic freedom in various contexts](#) from Northern Illinois University's Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning

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