

# In Defense of the Right to Free Speech and Peaceful Protest on University Campuses

The AAUP and its chapters defend the right to free speech and peaceful protest on university campuses, condemn the militarized response by institutional leaders to these activities, and vehemently oppose the politically motivated assault on higher education.

Our colleges and universities are places of free and open expression, inquiry, and debate. Even in sharp disagreement, our goal is communication in service of learning and understanding. The critical evaluation of different points of view and the questioning of even the most deeply held beliefs are essential to learning. So too is our students' right to protest and to express their political convictions.

In a democratic society based on the fundamental value of free speech, it is unacceptable to respond to demonstrations with violent repression. When the Speaker of the House of Representatives equates protesters at Columbia University with terrorists, he irresponsibly incites violence. When politicians demand the resignation of university presidents, they threaten the autonomy of private universities. These actions continue an alarming and decades-long trend of undermining the shared governance, academic freedom and independence that have made American higher education globally preeminent. These recent interferences and threats are part of an ongoing partisan, political attack intended to dismantle higher education in service to the public interest, and make our institutions beholden only to corporate, political and private interests. They are an existential threat to democracy.

We condemn, in the strongest possible terms, the heavy-handed, militaristic response to student activism that we are seeing across the country. At this critical moment, too many cowardly university leaders are responding to largely peaceful, outdoor protests by inviting law enforcement in riot gear to campus and condoning violent arrests. These administrators are failing in their duty to their institutions, their faculty, their students, and their central obligation to our democratic society. When university administrators limit when, where, and how free speech may be exercised, and require advanced applications for permission of such expression, they effectively gut the right itself. To insist that harsh discipline and violent repression are necessary to combat hate on a college campus is a pretext to suppress protest and silence speech.

Harassment and hate have no place on college campuses or anywhere. Universities have carefully developed policies and disciplinary procedures based on due process to address these long-standing problems and these must be used now and allowed to run their course. Policies enacted unilaterally after October 7 violate principles of shared governance, and institutions

should enforce only mutually-approved policies which, on a college campus, should be focused on restorative justice and learning in service of understanding.

We are alarmed at the shameless exertion of pressure on university leaders by the nation's politicians, by the universities' most powerful donors, and by other interest groups. We are even more alarmed at how quickly our institutional leaders have capitulated to that pressure. In just a few months, too many university leaders have abandoned long-standing principles of academic freedom and shared governance that are meant to protect colleges from such outside influence. Policies guaranteeing academic freedom and free speech mean nothing if they are not upheld in times of stress. We call on institutional leaders to reinstate student organizations shut down in recent months for political activity, to drop charges against peaceful protesters, to observe due process in disciplinary actions, to keep armed law enforcement off campuses, and to uphold fundamental freedoms for students and faculty.

AAUP stands with our chapters and members nationwide who are defending free speech, the right of assembly, and associational rights for students. The way forward is through education and dialogue, not through zip-ties and fear-mongering. We invite all AAUP members, AAUP chapters, higher-education unions and any organizational ally to endorse these positions by signing this statement.

Signed:

- Allegheny College AAUP Chapter
- American Association of University Professors
- American University AAUP Chapter
- Ball State University AAUP Chapter
- Barnard College AAUP Chapter
- Bowling Green State University Faculty Association AAUP Chapter
- Bucknell University AAUP Chapter
- California Faculty Association
- The Coalition for an Ethical Psychology
- College of the Holy Cross AAUP Chapter
- Columbia AAUP Chapter
- Cornell University AAUP Chapter
- Eckerd College AAUP Chapter
- Franklin & Marshall College AAUP Chapter
- Gallaudet University AAUP Chapter
- George Mason University AAUP Chapter
- Georgia State Conference of the AAUP
- Guilford College AAUP Chapter
- Indiana University–Bloomington AAUP Chapter
- Indiana State Conference of the AAUP
- Kennesaw State University AAUP Chapter

- Lamar University AAUP Chapter
- La Salle University AAUP Chapter
- Lewis & Clark College AAUP Chapter
- Marquette University AAUP Chapter
- Maryland State Conference of the AAUP
- Misericordia University AAUP Chapter
- Morehouse College AAUP Chapter
- Nevada Faculty Alliance
- The New School AAUP Chapter
- New York State Conference of the AAUP
- New York University AAUP Chapter
- North Carolina State Conference of the AAUP
- North Carolina State University AAUP Chapter
- Purdue University–Fort Wayne AAUP Chapter
- Purdue University–West Lafayette AAUP Chapter
- Scholars for a New Deal for Higher Education
- Seton Hall University AAUP Chapter
- St. Bonaventure University AAUP Chapter
- Students for Justice and Peace at Elon University
- Syracuse University AAUP Chapter
- Texas A&M University–San Antonio AAUP Chapter
- Texas A&M–College Station AAUP Chapter
- Texas AAUP-AFT Conference
- Texas Faculty Association
- Towson University AAUP Chapter
- Trinity University AAUP Chapter
- UC-AFT Local 1474
- Union College AAUP Chapter
- United Academic of Alaska AAUP-AFT
- United Academics of the University of New Mexico
- United Academics of the University of Oregon
- United Academics of Vermont
- United Campus Workers of Georgia
- United Campus Workers of Arizona
- United Faculty of Florida
- University of Chicago AAUP Chapter
- University of Delaware AAUP Chapter (Executive Council)
- University of Texas at Austin AAUP Chapter
- University of Houston AAUP Chapter (executive committee)
- University of Maryland–College Park AAUP Chapter
- University of Miami AAUP Chapter
- University of Minnesota–Twin Cities AAUP Chapter
- University of Michigan–Ann Arbor Chapter
- University of Nebraska–Lincoln AAUP Chapter

- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill AAUP Chapter
- University of North Carolina at Greensboro AAUP Chapter
- University of Pennsylvania AAUP Chapter
- University of Rhode Island AAUP Chapter
- University of South Carolina–Columbia AAUP Chapter
- University of Southern California AAUP Chapter
- University of Tulsa AAUP Chapter
- University of Virginia AAUP Chapter
- University of Wisconsin–Madison AAUP Chapter
- Vanderbilt University AAUP Chapter
- Washington and Lee University AAUP Chapter
- Washington State University AAUP Chapter
- Wayne State University AAUP Chapter
- Whitman College AAUP Chapter
- Whittier College AAUP Chapter

Faculty, student, or labor organizations interested in signing on to this statement, please contact Austin Rhea at [arhea@aaup.org](mailto:arhea@aaup.org).

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