

Forum on Academic Freedom

This History of Education Quarterly forum was inspired by recent assaults on academic freedom across the globe. Whether through watch lists, firings, detentions and jail sentences, or visa denials to travel to professional conferences, professors and teachers are battling for the freedom to regulate their professional lives against government (and even administrative) officials who invoke national security and patriotism to justify suppression and enforce a particular consensus on contentious issues.

We asked several scholars to reflect on the implications of their research and scholarship with regard to ongoing issues of academic freedom today. Specifically, we asked them to consider how intellectual censorship and suppression were first and most strongly perpetrated and expressed in the historical cases and contexts they have examined; how intellectuals, students, faculty, and teachers first responded to those pressures; and what responses were most and least effective. The authors of the eight essays that follow examine these questions across various time periods and different contexts. All recognize the tenuous nature of academic freedom protections and call for a renewed commitment to safeguarding freedom of inquiry. This introductory comment discusses the essays as a whole and highlights important patterns, threats, and possibilities.

Protecting Academic Freedom: Using the Past to Chart a Path Toward the Future

Joy Ann Williamson-Lott

The role of higher educational institutions in society, no matter where they are located on the globe, has shifted over time. Colleges and universities have been expected to alter their missions and their role in society as additional institutions appeared, more and increasingly diverse students attended, different funding sources materialized, and alternate national priorities emerged. Elected officials, dictatorial regimes, major donors, trustees, college and university administrators, and professors, though, have not agreed on what that particular role should be. One major point of debate has been whether the institutions and their faculty members served government interests or whether the institutions were independent entities in which professors pursued knowledge for its own sake. The following pieces demonstrate that the answer has depended on the national context, the time period, and the particular proclivities of government agents.

“Academic freedom” for professors has had a long implicit history but became more clearly defined in the early nineteenth century with the German concept of *lehrfreiheit*, the ability of professors to determine their own research agenda, the content of their syllabi and lectures, and how and where to publish their findings. Its popularization, particularly in the West, demonstrated the academy’s interest in preventing politicians from interfering in their work and academic lives. It was to be a line in the sand that separated professors—experts in their fields who grounded their work in rigorous study and who followed evidence wherever it might lead—from those who sought to create and use knowledge merely for political expediency. Drawing that line was easier said than done.

Government officials have always recognized the power of colleges and universities in building, maintaining, and justifying their rule and regularly sought to exploit it. Beth le Roux explains how the apartheid South African government cultivated a careful balance between the appearance of intellectual freedom with the need to protect the legalized racial hierarchy. In the early 1970s, according to Vania Markarian, the Uruguayan dictatorial regime closed the only university in the country and fired or jailed deans, professors, and students it suspected of opposing the new authoritarian government. The institution reopened with government appointees in administrative posts who maintained control of everything from faculty absentee policies to classroom examinations. Chinese government officials also sought to control higher educational institutions to bolster their power, but the Confucian knowledge tradition also influenced the nature and understanding of academic freedom there. As Qiang Zha and Wenqin Shen point out, traditional Confucianism linked knowledge and action in a way that promoted the concept of “action intellectuals,” professors beholden not to freedom of inquiry but to ensuring social order and benevolent governance. More recently, as Anne Corbett and Claire Gordon discuss, the Hungarian government moved to take control of Central European University, just as it had the media and the judiciary, in order to consolidate power.

Other pieces in this forum provide examples of government interference in and pressure on the academy as well, including at the pre-collegiate level. Even more examples can, no doubt, be found in other nation-states. Whether through loyalty oaths, laws, government-sponsored commissions, or the use of federal funding as a carrot to direct the path of research, state agents have had a chilling effect on freedom of thought and expression in the academy.

However, it is also important to remember that institutions, not just governments, punished teachers who strayed too far from the company line. Administrators employed a wide range of tactics to target those whose research or public pronouncements jeopardized funding sources and goodwill. Beyond firing, administrators used the hiring process to prevent their employment in the first place; refused to promote or tenure dissidents; or used less formal mechanisms, including allowing continued harassment or simple neglect, to encourage a teacher to leave the institution. Not surprisingly, many teachers self-censored as a way to remain above the fray, employed, and out of jail.

In these different contexts, some scholars were more vulnerable than others. As Karen Graves argues in her essay on K-12 LGBT teachers, sometimes *who* was speaking was just as important as *what* was being said. Timothy Reese Cain, Marjorie Heins, and Hans-Joerg Tiede sound the alarm with regard to contingent or adjunct faculty as a particularly vulnerable class in the contemporary context. In the United States, the American Association of University Professors, the organization most concerned with protecting academic freedom, linked permanent tenure to academic freedom: professors needed job security in order to fully exercise their freedom to publish, write, and teach on controversial topics. As institutions of higher education continue to hire faculty who are not on the tenure track at an increasing rate, securing academic freedom becomes all the more important—and all the more difficult.

There is hope, though. Several authors in this forum point to social movements or shifts in ideology as catalysts for increased protections for academic freedom. My own work on the southern United States during the mid-twentieth-century documents the growth of academic freedom protections against the backdrop of the black freedom struggle and anti-Vietnam War movement.¹ There, professors at black and white, private and public institutions helped transform their campuses from institutions that fortified and justified the racial hierarchy into reputable academic centers that fostered and rewarded independent thinking. In fact, all the authors in this forum remind us that administrators, teachers, and students have the power to resist external influence and promote the robust exchange of ideas. Coordinating, pooling, and marshaling that power has been, and probably will continue to be, difficult but it is vital to the health of the academy and to society itself.

doi: 10.1017/heq.2018.17

¹Joy Ann Williamson-Lott, *Jim Crow Campus: Higher Education and the Struggle for a New Southern Social Order* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2018).