

# Academic Freedom and Classroom Speech

## Introductory Statement

As college students, you are here to learn not just facts, but how to think critically think and reason. In many of the classrooms you'll enter, your preconceived notions, and sometimes deeply held beliefs, will be challenged. We ask you to embrace the opportunity to hone your own ideas and strengthen your opinions both outside and inside the classroom.

The value of research and education is significantly diminished if professors fear retribution for unpopular findings or if it is done with the interference of biased stakeholders. This is why maintaining academic freedom is a core value of our university. For teaching and learning to flourish, professors must be free from institutional censorship and intimidation, and must be allowed to run class as they see fit in order to facilitate learning and discussion.

Similar to how First Amendment protections allow us to question the orthodox and test the controversial, academic freedom allows professors and researchers to conduct their studies without fearing negative consequences based on their findings. What discoveries could Galileo have made if he was not charged with heresy and banned from teaching for finding that the earth revolves around the sun? These are the kinds of questions we hope to avoid by protecting the academic freedom of our faculty.

While you may question your professors, and in fact sometimes may be encouraged to do so, professors maintain the right to determine the content of class lessons and the flow of classroom discussion. Curiosity and a healthy amount of skepticism are key components of learning, but respecting your professors as leaders of the classroom environment is also critical. Classrooms are not public forums, such as public sidewalks or greenspaces; they are spaces where discussion is curated by your professor based on relevance to the topic at hand.

In this next skit, you'll see an example of a student being confrontational to the point of violating a professor's right to run the classroom. While watching, consider not just the impact disruptive behavior has on the individual professor, but the impact it can have on the entire class' learning experience.

## SKIT: Inappropriate Class Interruption

**Number of speaking actors:** 3

**Set up:** Like a classroom, chairs or desks facing the professor. Syllabi for students and the professor to hold.

**Script:**

**Professor:** Hi, welcome to Bio 101. As you can see from your syllabus, our first lesson is on evolution, and we'll be reading excerpts from Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Next we'll be...

**Student A:** [Raises hand]

**Prof:** Yes, you have a question?

**A:** Yeah, I just wanted to say that I read the *Origin of Species* in high school and found it reductive and not persuasive.

**Prof:** I'm glad you're familiar with the text! This is not a conversation for the moment since we're just reviewing the syllabi, but I hope our class discussions and the additional reading we'll be covering will give you a well-rounded



view of the strides the scientific community has made regarding the understanding of evolution. Please write those thoughts you have on Darwin down so you remember them when we get to the lesson on the Origin of Species. Sound good?

**A:** Will do, thanks.

**B:** Excuse me, but I find the “theory” of evolution offensive to my belief system. There’s no way we came from monkeys.

**Prof:** Ok, I understand your reluctance, but I hope by the end of our first unit you’ll understand how scientists have continued to build upon Darwin’s original observations to find more scientific evidence for evolution. Again, we really need to move—

**B:** [Interrupts and stands up] You can fudge scientific “observations” to prove anything, and I won’t be swayed. This is brainwashing! I’ll have you know my last name is Smith, I’m one of THE Smiths whose name is on the building we’re in now. I’m going to tell my parents to call the dean and trustees unless you stop teaching this blasphemy.

**Prof:** You need to sit down or leave the class. My lessons can’t be dictated by donors. If you’d like to talk more about this, we can speak after class or during office hours, but right now I need to get through the rest of the syllabus so you guys can start your first lab.

**B:** You’re being dismissive and this is bull!

### Skit Reflection

As you can see, when questioning a professor devolves into being disruptive, it can hinder the educational experience not just for yourself, but for the entire class. The first student in this scenario questioned the professor, but did so in a respectful way. The second student, on the other hand, did not respect the professor’s request to reserve comments for a later date. Disruptive behavior is not an effective tool for persuasion in the classroom. If a professor deems it time to move on to the next part of their lesson and you still have comments, please ask your professor if you can continue your discussion after class or attend office hours to finish your conversation.

That being said, when you enter a classroom, you should expect to be treated fairly, free from discrimination and harassment, and to be graded fairly on the merits of your work and contributions. If you have a dispute with a professor and are unable to come to a resolution or feel you are being discriminated against, please reach out to your dean of students or ombudsman. They can serve as a third-party mediator and help you make sure your educational experience is being respected.

We encourage you to take charge of your own educational experience. If you see something in a syllabus that gives you pause or if a class discussion becomes too uncomfortable, reach out to your professor to see if they have any advice on how to approach the material or how to decide if the class is right for you. A circumstance like this may be unavoidable. Take for example viewing violent images when studying forensic science. You can ask your professor for advice if it makes you uncomfortable, but that kind of content is intrinsic to the nature of such a class, and your professor is under no obligation to whitewash the realities of such a profession or to change their lesson materials. Learning should challenge you, but only you know your limits, so you must decide if a class is right for you.

To provide an example of a student who went about this in the wrong way, at Crafton Hills College in California a student signed up for an English class that focused on graphic novels. The professor had chosen some books involving LGBTQ relationships, which went against the student’s personal beliefs. Instead of reviewing the syllabus, realizing that the novels they were going to cover contained content the student found offensive, and exploring

options to sign up for a different class, she demanded the books be “eradicated from the system.” While it was in her right to advocate for whatever cause she wanted outside the classroom, it was also in the professor’s right to choose which books to cover in a special topics course such as this.

The real academic freedom violation in that case came when the college told the professor that, in light of the resulting public controversy, he must place a content warning on his syllabus. While content warnings are something that professors are free to use at their own discretion, mandating such a warning can have a chilling effect and can lead teachers to steer clear of controversial content. Especially for an untenured professor, the fear of being punished for forgetting a specific content warning or not correctly predicting how a work of literature could trigger a student may lead them to stay away from thought provoking works or class discussions.

Luckily, Crafton Hills College realized that mandated content warnings would endanger the professor’s autonomy and discourage the kind of critical thinking necessary for learning, so it retracted the request. What I hope you take from this case example is that part of empowering yourself to take control of your educational experience is respecting your professors’ right to academic freedom.

We’ll leave you with this quote from Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter’s opinion in *Sweezy v. New Hampshire* on the importance of academic freedom:

A university ceases to be true to its own nature if it becomes the tool of Church or State or any sectional interest. A university is characterized by the spirit of free inquiry, its ideal being the ideal of Socrates — ‘to follow the argument where it leads.’ This implies the right to examine, question, modify or reject traditional ideas and beliefs. Dogma and hypothesis are incompatible, and the concept of an immutable doctrine is repugnant to the spirit of a university. The concern of its scholars is not merely to add and revise facts in relation to an accepted framework, but to be ever examining and modifying the framework itself.

## **BONUS ACTIVITY: Roundtable on Academic Freedom**

Discussing academic freedom can be a great way to involve your faculty representatives in your orientation. Consider hosting a roundtable discussion on academic freedom with representatives from your faculty. Have a representative from your administration moderate, posing common questions about academic freedom and classroom speech to jump start the discussion. You can use the prepared remarks above to introduce or close out your panel discussion. Questions posed to the panel could include:

- What is academic freedom and why is it needed?
- Why is it important for professors to have discretion over what they teach and how they teach?
- How should students expect college classroom discussions to be different from their high school classroom discussions?
- What advice do you have for students who enter your classroom worried that they might not have the same opinions as you or the rest of the class?
- How does having students of opposing viewpoints in your class positively affect the learning environment?
- When you have your students use online discussion boards for assignments, do you find that they talk to each other differently? What should students consider when engaging in online discussions?
- What can students do if they feel their rights are being violated in the classroom?
- Do you remember a time when a professor or mentor challenged one of your basic assumptions or beliefs? How did you benefit from that experience?