

AAUP President Irene Mulvey's Letter Regarding Academic Freedom and DEI

Jennifer Ruth / 23 hours ago

In a letter to the editor, AAUP President Irene Mulvey responded to a series of articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in which AAUP statements were invoked to argue for the primacy of either academic freedom or diversity, equity, and inclusion. This framing pits the two against one another, as if our task were to choose one over the other. The two come into tension at times, Mulvey notes, but such “tension needs to be addressed by thoughtful and nuanced consideration.” “When tensions arise, when complaints are raised, faculty as a community of scholars dedicated to advancing knowledge and, ideally, committed to inclusivity and equity should be called upon to evaluate, educate, and communicate.” Please see the full text of the letter below.

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To the Editor:

Recent articles by Amna Khalid and Jeffrey Aaron Snyder (“[DEI Goals Are Worthy. Campus DEI Bureaucracies Fail Them](#),” *The Chronicle Review*, March 15) and Stacy Hawkins (“[Sometimes Diversity Trumps Academic Freedom](#),” *The Chronicle Review*, February 28) make the case that academic freedom and institutional DEI efforts are in competition and that they “will sometimes (perhaps increasingly often) collide.” Hawkins concludes that sometimes diversity trumps academic freedom, and administrators unilaterally get to decide when. Khalid and Snyder insist that academic freedom should always triumph. In support of their positions, each cites and interprets statements from the American Association of University Professors.

As AAUP President, I would like to add to the discussion by rejecting the premise of “competition” between academic freedom and DEI efforts since competition implies the need for a winner and a loser. There can be *tension* between academic freedom and DEI efforts on campus — both articles cherry-pick examples most suited to their position — but that tension needs to be addressed by thoughtful and nuanced consideration.

Khalid and Snyder are spot on with regard to the basics of academic freedom from the 1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure. Academic freedom for teaching and research is grounded in scholarly expertise, and includes the protection of extramural speech. They are correct in arguing against Hawkins’s claim (that administrators should be the deciders in DEI-based challenges to academic freedom) with their position that academic administrators “often lack the requisite knowledge and expertise about academic freedom (and the scholarly field under consideration, I would add) to make informed decisions.” Certainly, any challenge to academic freedom requires faculty involvement in the form of an elected faculty body or review committee. However, it’s hard not to see the bulk of their argument as simply an attack on DEI efforts.

Khalid and Snyder insist that they are not hostile to the “values of diversity and inclusion.” They “draw a sharp distinction between diversity, equity, and inclusion as concepts” and what they term DEI, Inc., the policies and language being used to set up DEI efforts on campus. This rings hollow. Values and concepts are all well and good to respect, but in tearing down campus efforts to promote those values while throwing in only a vague suggestion that cluster hires and academic-support services “hold much more promise that DEI box-ticking” leaves us with an essay that says I support these “values” and “concepts” but don’t ask me to do anything about how to make my campus or the academy more diverse, more inclusive, or more equitable. I take issue with their invocation of the 1915 Declaration’s discussion of the restraint professors must exercise with “immature” students whose minds are not “fully formed” as any kind of an argument for today’s campuses. The 1915 statement saw “students” primarily as young, white men from prominent families. Thankfully, today’s campuses are a lot more diverse than those of 1915, providing an opportunity for students and faculty to be exposed to people with many different backgrounds and perspectives. With that opportunity comes responsibility for faculty, in particular, to ensure that curriculum and pedagogy take into account a more diverse student body and the need, perhaps, for more listening, more discussion, more respect, more context, more nuance.

Hawkins is correct, of course, to point to the 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure. It is more relevant to today’s discussions than the 1915 Declaration, but she is wrong to suggest it’s AAUP’s last word on the matter. The 1940 Statement was updated in 1970 with Interpretive Comments, and followed by a number of derivative statements, investigations, and commentary. Academic freedom is, as both articles imply, defined, promoted, defended, and protected in the United States primarily by the AAUP. More importantly, the AAUP has regularly re-examined, reinforced, and [expanded](#) the concept.

Academic freedom and DEI efforts are not mutually exclusive and should not be seen in competition. Our institutions should be more diverse, more equitable, and more inclusive. We are called upon to address the longstanding inequities in higher ed and ensure our communities are truly welcoming to all. DEI efforts should be continued and continually improved. When tensions arise, when complaints are raised, faculty as a community of scholars dedicated to advancing knowledge and, ideally, committed to inclusivity and equity should be called upon to evaluate, educate, and communicate.

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