

Whitman College Statement on Academic Freedom

The faculty of Whitman College affirm the centrality of academic freedom to the mission of a liberal arts education. We are committed to the belief that an education in the liberal arts is vital to the functioning of a democratic society. We – as teacher-scholars – are engaged in the pursuit of knowledge and this pursuit can only flourish in a climate of freedom that encourages critical inquiry, open discussion, and the free exchange of ideas. When we engage in these endeavors in our teaching and scholarship, this freedom is understood as academic freedom. This freedom is central to our ability to provide the best possible education to our students, and thus is central to our institution.

Academic freedom encompasses the freedom for all individuals employed by the college in a teaching role to ask, pursue, and engage with a vast range of ideas and practices in their scholarship and teaching, by virtue of being experts in their discipline. Protected academic writing and speech is not confined to scholarship. Academics, in the course of their academic duties, also write memoranda, reports, and other documents addressed to such things as a budget, curriculum, departmental structure, faculty hiring, and institutional governance generally. Within the classroom, academic freedom includes freedom of discussion and freedom to select course materials, content, methodology, activities, and sequence within course objectives established in the official curriculum as approved by the faculty. This freedom extends to controversial matters related to the course subject in the reasonable and good-faith judgment of the faculty member, as rooted in the norms and practices within their fields and disciplines.

Educators at Whitman College are accorded freedom of speech when speaking on matters of public concern, free of institutional censorship and discipline regardless of the mode of communication in which the speech is delivered, subject to standards consistent with AAUP guidelines and First Amendment limitations. However, our special position in the Whitman community imposes certain obligations. As teacher-scholars we should remember that the public may judge our institution by our utterances. Therefore, faculty should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking on behalf of the institution when speaking on matters unrelated to their scholarship and teaching. Given that the nature of electronic communication tends to decontextualize meaning and attribution, the College recognizes that it generally is not feasible for faculty members to consistently indicate that they are speaking as individuals and not in the name of their institution.

In the event that the College believes an extramural utterance has been such as to raise grave doubts regarding the faculty member's ability to fulfill the responsibilities of their position, then the College is required to consult the Faculty Code (reference, Chapter 1, article 3, section 4 and 5 of the Faculty Code), the College's grievance policy, and the AAUP Statement on Academic Freedom for guidance. The AAUP statement affirms that "a faculty member's expression of opinion as a citizen cannot constitute grounds for dismissal unless it clearly demonstrates the faculty member's unfitness for his or her position. Extramural utterances rarely bear on a faculty member's fitness for their position." Any judgment of fitness should take into account the faculty member's entire record as a scholar and teacher. In such cases,

Whitman College will follow the standards of response set forth in the current Faculty Code (reference, Chapter 1, article 3, sections 4 and 5 of the Faculty Code) and the College Grievance Policy.

A diverse and inclusive community will include a range of viewpoints that may at times conflict. But it is not the proper role of the College to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and practices they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. While the College affirms a climate of mutual respect, concerns about civility shall not be used as a justification for closing off discussion of ideas. However, conduct that substantially disrupts the educational environment may be subject to review under existing College policies.

The College community as a whole has a responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless freedom of debate and deliberation, but also to protect that freedom when others attempt to restrict it. Such an open exchange of ideas is essential to a liberal arts education.

This statement represents Whitman College's shared commitment to the principles of academic freedom. The Whitman College Board of Trustees unanimously endorsed this statement in their November 15, 2024 meeting. The Faculty of Whitman College unanimously endorsed this statement in their December 4, 2024 meeting, along with President Sarah Bolton and Provost and Dean of the Faculty Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak.