

Academic Freedom in a Global Context: 21st Century Challenges

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Academic freedom is far from secure in many parts of the world, and in some places is under attack. Paradoxically, academic freedom is also more widespread in the early 21st century. This chapter highlights the challenges a complex academic and political environment poses to academic freedom.

First, let's illustrate the problems.

- A respected Egyptian sociologist was arrested for “defaming” Egypt and a prominent Iranian social scientist was sentenced to death for calling for democracy. International protests led to the Egyptian’s release and the lifting of the Iranian’s sentence in 2004.
- The vice chancellor of a Hong Kong university warned a faculty pollster to suppress polls critical of the region’s chief executive.
- The Milosevic regime in Serbia routinely arrested academic opponents.
- The Suharto regime in Indonesia occasionally jailed or fired Indonesian academics taking part in the democracy movement. That movement succeeded in toppling a government hostile to freedom of expression.¹
- Opposition to government policies led to the summary firing of 40 Ethiopian academics and the jailing of some of them.

- Chinese academics routinely censor themselves. Criticism, loss of jobs, or even imprisonment, they understand, can result from publishing research or opinions that contradict the views of the government.
- Government pressure in Malaysia and Singapore makes some topics taboo for research and publication.

Professors are completely under the thumb of repressive authorities in only a few countries. But many academics are subject to similar political pressures and to occasional government crackdowns. Current and potential threats warrant heightened awareness—and often, positive steps—to ensure that academic freedom thrives.

There’s cause for optimism elsewhere. Most countries in the former Soviet Union, and many central and eastern European nations, have achieved reasonable levels of academic freedom. Russia shows signs of backsliding, and Belarus is a disaster, but most of these academic systems back up their verbal commitments.

Universities cannot achieve their potential nor fully contribute to the emerging knowledge-based society without academic freedom. But it is far from secure. Even colleges and universities in western democracies face subtle but significant challenges

from the privatization and commercialization of research and from the complexities of the information society.² Nor does the topic rank high on the international agenda. Academic conferences seldom address academic freedom, nor do the declarations and the working papers of UNESCO or the World Bank.³ Finance and management issues preoccupy higher education leaders and funders.

Faculty members—the constituency most concerned about the mission and core values of the university—must remain vigilant.

ELUSIVE DEFINITIONS

The definition of academic freedom has expanded over time. Universities were considered special places—devoted to the pursuit and transmission of knowledge—since medieval times. The term implied the freedom of the professor to teach without external control in his or her area of expertise. It also implied the freedom of the student to learn. The Humboldtian university, which emerged in the early 19th century Germany, enshrined these ideals of *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit* and expanded the purview of academic freedom to include research. Academics claimed special rights because of their pursuit of truth, and expected secular and ecclesiastical authorities to grant universities autonomy.

But academic freedom was never absolute. Universities permitted greater freedom of expression than other social institutions, but only within campus confines, and only in teaching and research. Church and state often threatened and implemented sanctions to control teaching in medieval universities. Academic freedom rarely included protecting political and social views; few contemporaries worried that Continental universities rendered socialists ineligible for academic appointments in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Americans extended the concept of academic freedom when research universities appeared at the end of the 19th century. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), founded in 1915 included almost all activities related to the classroom and the laboratory, not just teaching and research within the field of scholarly expertise. Considering professors valuable social critics, the AAUP offered high levels of protection for expression *outside* the university. A 1918 reform movement applied an even broader definition of academic freedom to “autonomous” Latin American universities. Civil

authorities could enter university buildings only when permitted by the academic community.⁴ Confusion exists over the current definitions of academic freedom. Most of the world accepts the broader New World definition. But university and civil authorities in some countries assume the narrower Humboldtian definition. The concept is nowhere fully delineated nor backed by the force of law.

Do the claims of academic institutions and of professors for special rights and freedoms bring corresponding obligations? Universities, some observers argue, should not take overt political stands or become enmeshed in political debates or movements. Some observers, without condoning repression, distinguish between the right of individual professors to speak out on political or social issues and the concept of institutional neutrality. Academic institutions, they argue, should keep aloof from partisan politics.⁵ Still others call for institutional *and* individual disengagement from partisan controversies. Such disengagement, insist these observers, permits the best objective analysis.⁶

In developing countries, these observers note, the involvement of the academic community in independence struggles created a tradition of institutional engagement in politics. Latin American professors and students, for example, actively participated in the struggles against military dictatorships in the 1960s and 1970s. Their support of leftist movements often brought the wrath of their respective regimes down upon the university. Repressive governments in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile jailed, exiled, and killed large numbers of professors and students.

Debating institutional neutrality peaked in the 1960s—the period of opposition to the war in Vietnam. Few opposed the right of individual faculty or students to participate in antiwar movements, but many observers believed the institution should remain neutral. The appropriate social and political roles for universities remain unresolved parts of the debate about the role of academic freedom.

Does the liberty conferred by academic freedom create a reciprocal responsibility for faculty members?⁷ Those entrusted with teaching and research in higher education, some observers claim, must dedicate themselves to truth and objectivity in all their scholarly work: academe and politics should not be intertwined. Universities are not political institutions; survival depends on their ability to distance themselves from partisan politics.

Others, including the AAUP, have a more absolutist view of academic freedom: faculty members should have the right to participate in all “appropriate” activities; so may their representative bodies. The academic community—still lacking consensus—continues to debate the appropriate limits to academic freedom.

Americans also debate the influence of politics and ideology on universities. Academic factions, critics of “political correctness” charge, impose their views on departments and disciplinary associations, thereby compromising or eliminating the academic freedom of dissenters.⁸ Partisan politics and ethnic issues intrude into academic appointments, university elections, and publication and research in many Latin American and South Asian countries. These intrusions introduce extraneous conflicts and non-meritocratic factors into governance, teaching, and research. Such intrusions often appear unrelated to academic freedom, but they violate its norms if the term means freely pursuing teaching and research, and making decisions on academic criteria.⁹

The Internet and distance education pose new challenges. Are professors entitled to academic freedom in the cyber-classroom? May the cyber-professor design and deliver a course without external restrictions from sponsors—often profit-making companies—especially when development costs may be high? Who owns knowledge products developed for Internet use?¹⁰ These questions call for insightful answers as higher education moves to new modes of knowledge delivery.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

Academic freedom has a long, controversial history. For centuries, church and civil authorities attempted to restrict teaching, research, and public expression by the academic community. The Catholic Church forbade teaching theological and scientific doctrines contradicting accepted canon. Martin Luther, a professor of theology, lost his professorship when he fought with church officials over his theological views. Only when some universities in German areas became sympathetic, having turned Protestant, could he resume his academic duties. But, in turn, Protestant universities forbade Catholic theology and imposed confessional restrictions; for centuries, Oxford and Cambridge appointed only faculty and students loyal to the Church of England. Freedom of academic expression finally expanded, and professors gained latitude in

their teaching and research, after many struggles that culminated in the rise of the research university in the early 19th century.¹¹

Academic freedom has always been contested terrain—even in systems with strong traditions. Nazi Germany effectively obliterated academic freedom, despite its German origins. The Third Reich directly restricted the teaching content German universities, and fired Jewish, non-conformist, and politically dissident tenured professors. Few German voices protested against these developments. German professors’ organizations and student unions supported the Nazi suppression of academic freedom, and the universities themselves often implemented the changes.

Anticommunist hysteria during the 1950s Cold War-era gave American government authorities license to challenge academic freedom by seeking to rid the universities of alleged Communists. Loyalty oaths imposed on faculty in public universities in California and New York strained the academic profession, especially when public universities fired faculty members who refused to sign the oaths.¹² Elsewhere, investigations “exposed” leftist professors, leading to firings or forced resignations. Some universities invoked “academic freedom” to protect faculty members; others, succumbing to outside pressure, fired professors. Though relatively few, such terminations created a repressive atmosphere that imperiled academic freedom, because many academics *feared* dismissal. Serious damage to scholarship and universities thus occurred even in countries with strong commitments to academic traditions, norms, and freedom.

The Latin American academic tradition added to the debate about academic freedom. The idea of university autonomy, enshrined in the Cordoba Reforms of 1918, is a powerful force in Latin America.¹³ A student protest evolved into a significant reform of universities in Argentina and then in most of Latin America. Many public universities are by law and tradition autonomous, a status that protected professors and students during periods of political unrest. That protection, though far from comprehensive during the military dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s, determined the continent’s policies about the relationship between the state and higher education.

Academic freedom is less historically rooted or protected in countries that experienced colonial rule. Colonial powers, fearing unrest from subject peoples, modeled local universities on the metropolitan home university but permitted few of its freedoms.¹⁴

Intellectuals and students often led independence struggles thereby justifying the fears.¹⁵ Colonialism and independence struggles—combined with post-independence instability and crisis—hindered the firm rooting of academic freedom. Post-colonial governments still seek to maintain stability by interfering in academic affairs. Professors and students, in turn, remain involved in protest movements. Academic freedom remains tenuous, owing to the inauspicious conditions for building strong academic traditions.

CONTEMPORARY REALITIES

Should we create a comprehensive “world academic freedom barometer” that resembles existing measures of human rights and corruption? Definitional issues would hinder its design; here’s a brief survey—our closest alternative:

Severe Restrictions

Academic freedom is nonexistent in a few countries. In Burma—the most egregious example—a distrustful regime closes universities indefinitely to combat student unrest and to repress faculty criticism. Regimes that shut universities down also severely restrict the academic freedom of faculty members—their freedom to speak out on social or political issues and the views expressed while teaching *and* conducting their research.

Countries that integrate universities with a repressive regime build restrictions into the academic and political system. These restrictions are not responses to social unrest or political crises; rather, the absence of academic freedom is endemic and often complete. Professors can teach and conduct research with only minimal restriction in some scientific disciplines, but restrictions on teaching and writing are severe in sensitive fields, such as the social sciences. Violations result in loss of job, jail sentences, or worse. Nor do these regimes permit political or intellectual dissent.

North Korea provides a dramatic example; so does Syria, though restrictions are less severe. Oppositional ideas and movements emerged from Iranian universities, especially the University of Tehran, for decades. Students and faculty opponents of the Shah were key to overthrowing the monarchy and establishing a theocracy. Students also led the take-over of the U.S. embassy in the 1970s, a landmark event solidifying the new regime. But the Iranian academic community began to call for liberalization in the 1990s, and conservative governmental and religious authorities

now see the universities as a threat. Professors are caught in the middle of a power struggle. The fundamentalist regime repressed academic freedom on campus, threatened professors, and in at least one case sentenced a critical professor to death; internal pressure and international outcry overturned the sentence. Iran shows how campus opinion can change and how regimes may alter their perspectives on the role of the universities.

Significant Limitations and Periodic Crisis

A larger group of countries permits some academic freedom in many scientific fields. But these countries do not tolerate professorial involvement in “anti-regime” activities, and threaten severe penalties for transgressions including loss of academic jobs, prosecution, and imprisonment. Restrictions on academic freedom are an integral part of university life in China, Vietnam, and Cuba. These restrictions are significant in politically or ideologically sensitive fields, such as the social sciences. In other fields, the academic environment resembles the climate in countries with greater degrees of freedom. Governments permit participation in international scientific and scholarly networks, and inhibit teaching and research only minimally.

Repression increases dramatically at times of political tension, such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square crisis in China. The Chinese government tightly controlled the universities for years after Tiananmen.¹⁶ Many Chinese recognized the historic importance of universities for political dissent: university-based demonstrations helped to topple the Chinese imperial government a century earlier.

Some Islamic countries fall into this category. The absence of democratic and academic traditions, potential political instability, and struggles between fundamentalist and secular forces within universities, create tensions between academe and government. Few universities possess strong traditions of academic freedom and autonomy—a deficiency making the professoriate vulnerable to external pressure. Academic supporters of fundamentalism in Egypt, Algeria, and some Arabian Gulf states may face arrest. All dissident views in Sudan engender repression. Most Islamic countries restrict some research topics and interpretations. The range of academic freedom extends from severe restrictions in Syria to modest problems in Egypt—*notwithstanding* the arrest of the Egyptian sociologist—to relative openness in Kuwait, and several Gulf countries.

Tension in the Context of Limited Academic Freedom

A larger group of countries claim a commitment to academic freedom; their professors are free, especially in the classroom and in research in politically or ideologically non-sensitive fields. But serious difficulties arise because the academic community seldom knows the acceptable limits, or the penalties for violating the restrictions. The perception that limits exist significantly chills teaching and research; testing those limits may be dangerous.

Government authorities may impose harsh penalties, often without warning. Jailing by the Ethiopian government of more than 40 Addis Ababa University professors for undisclosed reasons suggested political repression. Anti-regime sentiments, expressed in the classroom or in public, may cause problems elsewhere. Student opposition in Serbian universities elicited repression as the Milosevic regime sought to maintain its control. Conditions since Milosevic's downfall have changed for the better.

Political crises in countries where scholars ordinarily possess academic freedom may create difficulties for universities and an uneasy atmosphere for academics. Many African and Asian governments are weak and lack legitimacy.¹⁷ Academic traditions are not well established, often as a result of colonialism, and the universities depend on the state for support. The large Nigerian academic system enjoys considerable academic freedom, save during military takeovers. Smaller African countries with weaker academic traditions have less academic freedom. In Asia, Cambodia, emerging from decades of repression, is slowly rebuilding its universities. But governmental instability, dependence on a few funding sources, and the near-total destruction of higher education during the Khmer Rouge years make academic freedom difficult to establish.¹⁸

Instituting academic freedom under political unstable conditions faces considerable challenges. Universities often function as centers of political and intellectual dissent, and regimes are thus reluctant to allow institutions the freedom and autonomy that may contribute to instability. An academic community that is unused to academic freedom and perhaps engaged in political struggle may not be in a position to create academic freedom or to exercise the self-discipline involved.

Academic Freedom with Limits

Some nations restrict faculty research topics and freedom of public expression.¹⁹ Many professors resist

these restrictions, despite their wide acceptance in the academic community. Sanctions for violating the often-unstated norms can range from mild rebukes by administrators to loss of jobs or, in rare cases, prosecution in the courts. Singapore and Malaysia informally ban certain research topics, such as ethnic conflict, religious issues, and local corruption, especially if research findings question government policies.

Academics must also watch classroom statements on sensitive issues because the penalties for violating these norms can be serious. In Singapore, the former Prime Minister, Lee Kwan Yew, occasionally came to National University of Singapore faculty meetings to criticize academics for their writings and to encourage the faculty to support his definition of the "national interest." More tolerant political leaders have assumed power in both countries, and academic discourse has become more open. Arab countries with a modicum of academic freedom possess taboo research subjects as well—aspects of Islam and the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example.

Many countries restrict academic freedom. Continued good relations, budgetary allocations, and research funds, warn government officials, depend on appropriate academic and political behavior by the faculty and the institution.

The Reemergence of Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is gaining in strength in two parts of the world. Latin America has a strong tradition of academic freedom and autonomy, going back at least to the 1918 Cordoba Reforms.²⁰ Political turmoil throughout much of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s led to military coups, social instability, and guerilla struggles. Many large public autonomous institutions in capital cities were deeply involved in the struggles, almost always on the side of the leftist dissidents. In Peru, for example, several key leaders of the violent Sendero Luminoso movement were former professors, and the movement had some support in the universities. Throughout Latin America, activist students left the campuses to join, or even lead, anti-government guerilla movements. Military authorities, with little commitment to or understanding of academic freedom, moved violently against the academic community, and the ideas of academic freedom and university autonomy suffered serious setbacks. Dissident professors were exiled, jailed, and even killed. Student movements were violently repressed. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador,

Peru, and Uruguay severely restricted academic freedom. Academic life in Latin America returned to normal as violent dissent decreased and as democratic governments replaced military rulers.

Partisan politics continue to infuse Latin American campus elections and academic life. But it was possible to rebuild, and perhaps even strengthen academic freedom. Strong traditions of academic freedom, the Latin American experience shows, can survive periods of severe repression.

Academic freedom also resurged in Central and Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union—countries with venerable academic histories. The Czech Republic and Poland were home to some of the world's oldest universities, but Nazi occupation, followed by over four decades of Communist rule, completely eroded academic freedom. Universities became arms of the state, which expected ideological loyalty. Severe sanctions for violating political or academic orthodoxy included removal from academic posts and prosecution. Communist governments considered academic freedom an inappropriate “bourgeois” concept, as all elements in a socialist society, including the universities, were subject to the needs of the state for economic development and social reconstruction.²¹

The collapse of communism permitted restoration of academic freedom and autonomy, and dismantling of the ideological accoutrements of the communist era. Countries with long academic traditions, stable democratic governments, more robust economies, and closer ties to the major Western nations—such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland—moved quickly. Teaching and research are no longer subject to ideological and political goals and face no sanctions. Merit determines most promotions. The summary removal of professors identified as overly loyal to the communist regimes, some observers argued, violated due process and academic freedom. But membership in the European Union will further strengthen the norms of academic freedom in these countries.

Academic freedom is largely absent in Belarus and is in severe difficulty in several Central Asian republics. But it has revived in Ukraine and in the former Yugoslavia, with the restoration of a tenuous peace and the end of the Milosevic regime in Serbia. Conditions in Russia are much improved despite deterioration during the Putin regime. Weak traditions of academic freedom, dependence on governments with

only limited popularity or legitimacy, and decades of severe repression make building strong norms of academic freedom in parts of the region difficult. Compounding the problem: a new private higher education sector appears more interested in serving large numbers of students and in attaining financial stability than in maintaining high standards of academic freedom.

The Industrialized Countries

Academic freedom is strong in the industrialized nations—as an ideal and usually in practice. Japan and Germany, where hostile governments abolished academic freedom prior to World War II, reestablished strong traditions following the war. The American anticommunist restrictions of the 1950s lasted only a few years. Industrialized nations value academic freedom in teaching and research and accept freedom of expression for professors within the university and in society. Few, if any, governments now restrict activities of universities, professors, or students.

But some issues deserve attention. The greatest threat to academic freedom in the United States, argue some observers, lies within the academy. The dominant forces in the professoriate, critics claim, seek to enforce “political correctness” in the social sciences and humanities—imposing liberal or radical orthodoxy, and to silence opposing viewpoints.²² Scholarly associations, such as the Modern Language Association, recently experienced fierce ideological battles that raised questions about the tolerance of diverse perspectives. But conservatives offer little supporting evidence of restrictions on academics with divergent views or of instances of job loss.²³ Other nations earlier addressed the politicization of academic institutions and disciplines—when ideology intruded into elections and academic appointments in Western Europe during the 1960s, for example.

Increased corporate involvement in academe, and the growth of privately sponsored research, some observers argue, threatens academic freedom via control of research funding. The interests of firms, these observers argue, has “corporatized” academe.²⁴ The federal government reduced support for basic research in some fields, and failed to keep pace with scientific needs in others. Corporations provide a growing portion of research funding, especially in the biomedical sciences. These sponsors favor applied work yielding quick results leading to patents over

basic research. Research results are often considered proprietary, and are sometimes suppressed because of corporate funding arrangements. Many observers believe this emphasis violates the freedom of academics to disseminate the results of their research. Privatizing research funding and the links between industry and the universities complicate the debate about academic freedom. Indirect and subtle threats concern the ownership of knowledge and the norms of scholarly communication.

A related issue is “managerialism”—the shift in power and authority from the professoriate to professional managers and external governing bodies in determining the university’s direction, developing the curriculum, maintaining classroom control and selecting and implementing research topics.²⁵ Reduced faculty autonomy and power may well reduce academic freedom.

How does the academic profession itself view academic freedom? A survey of academics in 14 middle income, mostly industrialized nations, on all continents except Africa responded positively (75 percent range) to questions about the degree of academic protection. The exceptions: Brazil and Russia, where faculty majorities answered negatively. But about 20 percent responded negatively in all countries except Israel, and significant numbers disagreed with this statement: “In this country, there are no political or ideological restrictions on what a scholar may publish” (34 percent in the United States, 25 percent in the United Kingdom, and 27 percent in Mexico). Academics are reasonably sanguine about the state of academic freedom, despite some unease.²⁶ Subtle challenges to academic freedom in industrialized countries are perhaps more harmful than readily grasped and opposed overt violations.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Academic freedom is a fundamental prerequisite for an effective university, and a core value for academia. The higher education community must place academic freedom at the forefront of concern; just as human rights is an international priority. Higher education is international in scope—issues arising in one country affect others.

Also required: a sophisticated understanding of the complex issues relating to academic freedom. Here’s a proposed action agenda.

- Place academic freedom at the top of the agenda. International conferences must devote panels to

the topic, in addition to financial issues, accountability, and institutional survival.

- Agree to a universal definition. At present, definitional disagreements make common understanding and unified action difficult. Should we limit the scope to protecting teaching and research within university confines and within areas of scholarly expertise? Or should the definition encompass expression and action on additional issues within and outside the university?
- Monitor violations of academic freedom; subject violations to worldwide publicity. Tracking academic freedom issues and promptly disseminating information about crises and trends is easily accomplished in the Internet age. An “early warning system” would heighten consciousness.
- A more rigorous mechanism for investigating academic freedom violations. The AAUP has monitored academic freedom in the United States for many years and censures universities that violate academic freedom—a warning for the academic community. The AAUP can lift censure when the violation is remedied. But AAUP has no other sanctions at its disposal, and censure often has little impact. A similar international arrangement, though problematic and expensive to organize, would increase attention to severe violations.
- Carefully analyze subtle violations of academic freedom—stemming from the privatization of research, and the growth of the for-profit sector in higher education. “Scholars at Risk,” a solidarity network for academic freedom headquartered at New York University, increases consciousness about academic freedom worldwide and places academics facing repression in supportive universities.

CONCLUSION

Every debate about universities must include academic freedom—an oft-overlooked core value requisite for effective teaching and research—along with new millennium buzzwords such as managerial accountability and distance education. Hostile forces still persecute professors. And new challenges to the traditional ideal of academic freedom loom large: new technologies, restructured traditional universities, an expanded private sector that includes for-profit institutions, a privatized public sector, and corporatized research. The future of the university depends on defending our colleges and universities from these challenges.

NOTES

- ¹ Human Rights Watch, 1998.
- ² McSherry, 2001.
- ³ Burgan, 1999.
- ⁴ Walter, 1968.
- ⁵ Ashby, 1974.
- ⁶ Trow, 1985.
- ⁷ Shils 1991, 1–22; Russell, 1993.
- ⁸ Kors and Silverglate, 1998.
- ⁹ Metzger, 1988.
- ¹⁰ McSherry, 2001.
- ¹¹ Perkin, 2006.
- ¹² Schrecker, 1986.
- ¹³ Walter, 1968.
- ¹⁴ Ashby, 1966; Altbach, 1989.
- ¹⁵ Lulat, 2003.
- ¹⁶ Hayhoe, 1999.
- ¹⁷ Diouf and Mandani, 1994.
- ¹⁸ Chamnan, 2000.
- ¹⁹ Altbach, 1988.
- ²⁰ Walter, 1968.
- ²¹ Connelly, 2000.
- ²² Kors and Silverglate, 1998.
- ²³ Horowitz, 2006.
- ²⁴ Slaughter and Rhoads, 2004.
- ²⁵ Tierney, 2004.
- ²⁶ Boyer, Altbach, and Whitelaw, 1994, 101.

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