

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE CHALLENGES OF SEPTEMBER 11

by Michelle Asha Cooper



Since the founding of the nation, democratic ideals—the beliefs that all human beings have equal value, deserve equal respect, and have equal opportunity to exercise their freedom to participate in all aspects of society—have been recognized as the national creed. However, the historical reality of the United States suggests that the realization of these democratic ideals has yet to be achieved. Within this society, there have always been people, traditionally racial minorities and women, who bear the scars of having lived as marginalized and stigmatized persons. For these Americans, in particular, democracy's promises of recognition, opportunity, equality, and justice remain largely unfulfilled.

"Democracy", writes Walt Whitman, "is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten because that history has yet to be enacted."¹

Over two hundred years since its birth, "American democracy" continues to face challenges, as people across the world fight and die to establish democracies of their own. Likewise, American history is saturated with stories of struggles and tensions, all in an effort to secure democracy

Michelle Asha Cooper is a program associate in the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Global Initiatives at the Association of American Colleges and Universities in Washington, DC. Prior to joining AAC&U, Ms. Cooper worked at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, as the director of multicultural and international affairs. Ms. Cooper is currently completing course work for her doctorate in educational policy and leadership at the University of Maryland.

for all citizens. For the American Indians, “American democracy” has served to abrogate their rights, confiscate their land, and decimate their culture. Similarly, the United States Constitution did not recognize the humanity of African Americans until the ratification of the 14th Amendment.

Even with this amendment and the subsequent passage of the Civil Rights Act, African Americans have perpetually struggled to attain equality. Likewise, second-class citizenship has been the reality of Latino

Americans, particularly those in the Southwest.² In essence, some of the greatest challenges to “American democracy,” historically, stemmed from internal strife between those in power and marginalized groups. However, the most recent challenge to the concept of American democratic principles and practices—September 11—came from an external adversary.

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On September 11, 2001, within a matter of hours, the concept of “American democracy” changed dramatically. For the first time in recent history, all Americans—regardless of race, class, or gender—shared a common need for comfort and security. While I agree with John Lewis Gaddis that “no acts of commission or omission by the United States” could have justified the merciless attacks that characterized September 11, the impact of that day on the lives of American citizens has forced many to reflect on our notions of democracy—who we are as country, what we do, and how others perceive us and our actions.³

As a result, higher education, arguably one of democracy’s most critical institutions was faced with and continues to experience the challenge of helping students gain a deeper understanding of the world, of America’s role in the world, and of individual and collective opportunities to effect change. American colleges and universities from their inception have embraced the responsibility of educating the nation’s leaders, ensuring that they would become responsible, informed, and empowered citizens. This education was made possible largely because of the practice of free speech and inquiry that undergirds intellectual thought and expression in the academy and in American democratic society. It is through this tradition that the academy continues its obligation in advancing the ideals of democracy.

So in the wake of September 11, as students yearned for global knowl-

edge and an understanding of the complex forces that led to these acts of violence against innocent civilians, faculty members seized the opportunity to engage their students in critical discussion and reflection about American society and democracy, global realities, and the challenges that lay before American citizens. This paper explores the challenges and criticism that some faculty members and the academy encountered following September 11. But more importantly, it highlights the notable efforts made by faculty to engage their students, transform the classroom, and invigorate the academy.

TRANSFORMING THE
CLASSROOM POST-
SEPTEMBER 11

Criticisms of the professoriate monopolized much of the post-September 11 conversations regarding higher education and academic freedom. The reaction from the general populace as well as many within the academy to the comments and views of some faculty members fol-

lowing the attacks, rattled higher education's core. But in the midst of the escalating tension, few people, especially those external to the academy, discussed the phenomenal curricular and pedagogical developments in higher education that surfaced after this tragedy.

Many faculty used September 11 as an opportunity to exercise their academic freedom and classroom autonomy to develop new courses and areas of inquiry for themselves and their students. The attacks dramatically altered student interest in a number of subjects, and in some instances have altered the subject matter itself. The attacks also gave many courses a new relevance, and a new level of interaction among students and professors has occurred. Eugene O'Donnell, professor of criminal justice at John Jay College, believed that students' curiosity and yearning for answers has also challenged faculty expertise. Notes O'Donnell, "We're using an out-of-date textbook now."⁴

For more than a decade, scholars have been broadening their scholarship and teaching to include discussions around diversity, global realities, and cross-cultural interactions. September 11 added a new dimension to these areas of study. There are numerous examples of faculty efforts following September 11 to create a curriculum that would be inclusive, culturally relevant, and intellectually challenging.

At the University of California at Los Angeles, where the fall semester did not start until early October, faculty members seized the moment to

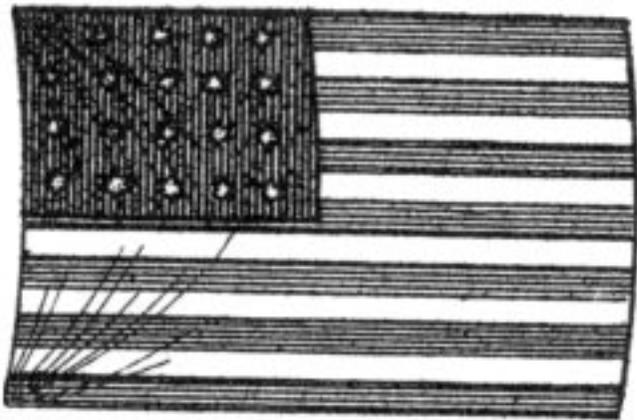
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create 50 new courses related to the events of September 11 and other global issues. Also, because of the large number of students interested in classes that dealt with the ideology supporting fundamentalism and terrorism, campuses with pre-existing courses, focusing on issues like Islam, International Relations, and Near-Eastern studies saw their enrollments increase significantly.⁵

Additionally, John Carroll University began developing curricular initiatives in history, political science, and religious studies that would introduce students to these disciplines in the context of broader issues of globalization, democracy, and cultural diversity.⁶ At these and many other institutions, faculty members quickly transformed their scholarship and modes of inquiry to reflect the immediate concerns of their students and the nation. This type of immediate response to curriculum transformation is not typical in higher education, where decision-making often takes a more protracted course. But September 11 was a time of urgent need, and by responding immediately, faculty helped students move toward healing and began to expand students' knowledge of themselves, their country, and their global neighbors.

THE ATTACK ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

In spite of this remarkable response, the academy received a severe tongue-lashing from several pockets within the community opposed to the views of some college and university faculty regarding the cause and



meaning of the terrorist attacks. For example, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) published, shortly after the attacks, a stinging report—*Defending Civilization: How Our Universities are Failing America and What Can be Done About It?* The report heavily criticized the academy’s response to September 11:

In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Americans across the country responded with anger, patriotism, and support of military interventions. . . . Not so in academe. While America’s elected officials from both parties and media commentators from across the spectrum condemned the attacks and followed the President in calling evil by its rightful name, many faculty demurred. . . . Some even pointed accusatory fingers, not at the terrorists, but at America itself.⁷

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The Council of Trustees and Alumni’s comments suggest that questioning American history, society, and politics is “un-American” or “un-patriotic,” and that dissent and debate over the goals and methods of U.S. policy weakens the country as a whole.

Yet the mission of the academy is quite the opposite. The ability to discuss difficult issues affecting society is the mark of an engaged citizen, a hallmark of a democratic society, and the role of the academy. It is this type of reflection and critical thinking that helps to foster a commitment to civic engagement and democratic principles within students.

Timothy Dean Draper of Waubensee Community College, in Sugar Grove, Illinois advocated such an approach to academic discussions of September 11. For this generation of students, notes Draper, “the cold war’s been won, there have been incredible scientific and medical breakthroughs, capitalism has proven to work really well.” But September 11 forced students to realize that “by no stretch of the imagination have all the world’s problems been solved. . . . There’s a pedagogical opportunity in that insecurity,” he said. “It’s forcing them out of their niche. Students are thinking beyond, I’m an American, I’ve been touched by this. They’re asking questions about who we are in the world and how the world perceives us.”⁸

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni wasn’t the only group questioning free speech and academic freedom. In the days and weeks immediately following September 11, while the media and general populace were focused on the actual terrorist attacks and individual instances

of racial profiling, a more subtle attack was being waged as professors across the country found their academic freedom challenged by incensed students, infuriated alumni, confused university officials, and eventually the general public.

Students heckled George Wright, a political science professor at California State University at Chico, when he criticized U.S. foreign policy during a September 11 campus vigil. In his speech, Wright called the events of September 11 “a crime against humanity,” but went on to criticize the Bush administration’s motives in declaring war. Local media coverage of the speech resulted in dozens of hate messages directed at Wright, coming through email from around the nation. He received threatening emails, with subject headings like “Dead Man Walking.”⁹

At Orange Coast College in California, the administration placed Ken Hearlson, a political science instructor, on leave after four Muslim students accused him of calling them “murderers” and blaming them for

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the attacks, during a class discussion. After examining several students’ tape recordings of the class, investigators found no evidence that a single person in the class was called a murderer or terrorist. Eleven weeks after Hearlson’s suspension without a hearing, the administration repealed the sanction error.¹⁰

While these two cases are not representative of the full spectrum of issues faced by faculty post-September 11, they do provide an example of the anti-intellectualism and censorship that often accompany national crises. “There is real pressure during times of national duress for conformity, unity, and for patriotism,” says Paul K. McMasters, who is the First Amendment ombudsman at the Freedom Forum, a foundation that supports free speech. “At a time when the country could most benefit from the diverse perspectives that we depend on academe to provide, there will be immense pressure on those in the academic community to repress their views”¹¹

Persecuting academics for espousing unpopular and unsettling opinions is not a new situation. A *New York Times* editorial, written in 1915 as a response to the American Association of University Professors’ “Declaration of Principles,” said, “Academic freedom, that is the inalienable right of every college instructor to make a fool of himself and his college...and still keep on the payroll.”¹²

While these sentiments may always exist within some circles, during times of national crises, they become more noticeable. In the 1950s, during the McCarthy era, hundreds of scholars were blacklisted and labeled as communists or supporters of communism. Then, during the 1960s and early 1970s, faculty who opposed the Vietnam War were subjected to similar intimidation.

In many cases, these attacks on faculty launched by students, the administration, the government, and the public left many scholars fearful and demoralized. September 11 added to the historical trend of criticism of faculty during national crises. Each of these events demonstrates that academic freedom, when protecting unpopular opinions, can ignite harsh critiques and attacks on the academy.

The current test of academic freedom emerges in what Neil Hamilton (1995) considers another wave of “zealotry aimed at suppressing freedom of academic thought and speech.”¹³ He believes:

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Freedom of academic thought and speech has been assaulted by the religious fundamentalism of trustees and administrators in the late nineteenth century, the unfettered capitalism of the trustees at the turn of the century, patriotism in World War I, anti-communism prior to World War II, McCarthyism in the early 1950s, student activism in the mid to late 1960s, and the fundamentalism of the radical academic left in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁴

Hamilton would certainly describe the latest attacks on academic freedom as another example of “zealotry” aimed at censoring the thoughts and speech of professors. He believes that each of these “waves of zealotry” was rooted in a set of beliefs about the world and the principles that ought to shape and guide it. Each ideology, he states, “has claimed that society is either deeply sick or severely threatened.”¹⁵

The criticism hurled at faculty who disapproved of U.S. foreign policy surrounding September 11, exacerbates the ideological tensions that already exist between higher education’s values and American popular opinion. The argument that the academic system is “wasteful and inefficient” coupled with a suspected lack of patriotism on the part of academics did not help higher education gain popularity. Joan Walsh Scott summarized this situation:

In the atmosphere of heightened patriotism that has accompanied the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the launching of war in Afghanistan....The representation of the war in the stark moral terms of good and evil puts anyone who would criticize the good on the side of evil; it leaves little room for the kind of debate and discussion that would deepen our understanding of what has happened, that would expose the complexities of the situation and the need for policies that address those complexities.¹⁶

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The American Association of University Professors 1940 "Statement on the Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure" states that "institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition."¹⁷

In keeping with Hamilton's theory, it can be said that the "search for truth and its free exposition" and strong ideological beliefs run counter to one another and will eventually collide. History has proven that the creation of new knowledge is painful and objectionable to believers in existing ideologies.

Throughout history, there have always been some in society who have viewed higher education with suspicion. And over the past three decades, the levels of scrutiny and calls for accountability have become more pronounced. As Cary Nelson and Michael Bérubé note, "Academy-bashing is now among the fastest-growing of major U.S. industries...teachers don't teach; scholars fritter away their time and your tax dollars."¹⁸

Just like our government leaders, faculty disagree on and debate the causes of and response to attacks on September 11. Such debate among our faculty is commonplace; there is always debate around issues such as politics, economics, education, and so forth. But, in times of crisis, our tolerance for diversity of thought and opinion diminishes, proving that academic freedom needs more protection during these moments than in ordinary times.

According to Drakich and colleagues, "The core of a truly inclusive university is a culture of academic freedom that will welcome changing pedagogies, fields, and university populations and promote equality."¹⁹ When analyzing academic freedom from this perspective, one realizes

how many professors have used their scholarly freedom to create positive impact on higher education, following September 11.

At institutions nationwide, instructors reevaluated what and how they taught in an effort to create new pathways for teaching and learning. They continued to move away from old curricular models that ignore that US history is the history of a nation of immigrants, forced and voluntary, and that patterns of disenfranchisement, marginalization, and subjugation continue to plague our world.

In the aftermath of September 11, faculty forged new pathways for teaching and learning that would prepare students for democratic citizenship and responsible global engagement—by enhancing their understandings of democratic realities, human rights struggles, and systemic inequalities, both at home and abroad.

These accomplishments demonstrate the willingness of faculty to remain vigilant in their attempt to

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expand and explore knowledge. Faculty members have an obligation that extends beyond the words of their employment contracts and carries over into their work with students, colleagues, professional and disciplinary associations, and the larger society. “[faculty] earn [their] privileges not just by guarding and augmenting [their] special bodies of knowledge, but also by undertaking to put knowledge to work for the good of all.”²⁰

Despite the reaction by the media, the public, and other groups to the unpopular comments uttered by a miniscule number of faculty, the overall response of the professoriate was positive. The professoriate seized the opportunity to enact real change.

Furthermore, in a democratic society, a level of civility is expected to accompany an exchange of views. Whether individuals agree or adamantly disagree, they should be able to engage in a civil discourse.

Unfortunately, much offensive criticism was hurled at faculty with dissenting opinions about the terrorist attacks and the government’s response. Reactions such as these must be challenged, not only because they threaten the tenets of academic freedom, but also because they polarize the academic community and the larger society. The academic community must not cringe at intimidation. Instead, administrators, along with faculty and students, must foster an environment, inside and outside the classroom, where all views can be respectfully examined and explored without fear of reprisal. After all, this is the foundation of a true democracy. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Association of American College and Universities, *The Drama of Diversity and Democracy: Higher Education and American Commitments* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 1995), 13.
- ² *Ibid.*, 1995.
- ³ Gaddis, John Lewis, "Setting Right a Dangerous World," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11 January 2002, 1.
- ⁴ Ana Marie Cox, "The Classroom Changed, Post September 11," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 October 2001, 1
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 2001, 1-8.
- ⁶ Association of American Colleges and Universities. *Liberal Education and Global Citizenship Project Summaries*, www.aacu-edu.org/globalcitizenship/projects/summaries.cfm (15 September 02).
- ⁷ American Council of Trustees and Alumni. *Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It*, Washington, DC: American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2002, 1.
- ⁸ Ana Marie Cox, *op. cit.*, 4.
- ⁹ For more information on this story see Robin Wilson and Ana Marie Cox, "Terrorist Attacks Put Academic Freedom to the Test," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 October 2001; Stanley Kurtz "Free Speech and an Orthodoxy of Dissent," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 October 2001.
- ¹⁰ For more information on this story see Robin Wilson and Ana Marie Cox, "Terrorist Attacks Put Academic Freedom to the Test," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 October 2001; Robin Wilson and Scott Smallwood, "One Professor Cleared, Another Disciplined Over September 11 Remarks," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11 January 2002; Andrea Billups, "Campus Hawks and Doves Find Speech Is Not So Free," *Washington Times*, 1 October 2001.
- ¹¹ Wilson and Cox, *op. cit.*, 1.
- ¹² Robert M. O'Neil, "Academic Freedom: Past, Present, and Future," In *American Higher Education in The Twenty-First Century: Social, Political and Economic Challenges*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 90.

In 1915, the American Association of University Professors issued the "Declaration of Principles." This was the first attempt at formally defining faculty freedoms.
- ¹³ Neal Hamilton, *Zealotry and Academic Freedom: A Legal and Historical Perspective*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995, 1.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1995, 1-2.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1995, 2.
- ¹⁶ Joan Walsh Scott, "September 11 & The Academic Profession: A Symposium," *Academe* 88 (January/February 2002), 1.
- ¹⁷ American Association of University Professors, "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure: With 1970 Interpretive Comments," in *Policy Documents and Report*. (Washington, DC: AAUP, 1995), 3.

AAUP's 1940 Statement identifies three freedoms to which every college and university instructor is entitled: the freedom to research and publish the results, the freedom to teach, and the freedom to communicate extramurally. In addressing the academic freedom of faculty outside the college or university setting, the Statement reminds that "teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution." In sum, even when speaking outside the walls of the academy, faculty have a responsibility to maintain their professional and institutional integrity.
- ¹⁸ Cary Nelson and Michael Bérubé, "Introduction: A Report From the Front, in *Higher Education Under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities* (New York: Routledge), 1.

- ¹⁹ Janice Drakich et. al. "Academic Freedom in the Inclusive University," in *Beyond Political Correctness: Toward the Inclusive University*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Inc., 1995), 120.
- ²⁰ Richard Ohmann, "Historical Reflections on Accountability." *Academe*, 86 (2002), 24.

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