

# Academic Freedom and the Christian University

by Rick Ostrander, March 2018

Academic freedom is the right of the professor to a degree of freedom in teaching and research, subject to professional standards of competence, relevance, and respect.<sup>i</sup> It is a foundational value of the academy. While the concept was long assumed in principle, threats to the academic freedom of professors in the early twentieth century led to the creation of a formal statement by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in 1940. This statement asserted the right of professors to “full freedom” in teaching and in research while also recognizing the right of religious institutions to limit academic freedom in ways that are consistent with their mission.

The institutions of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU) share the academy’s deep commitment to academic freedom. Indeed, one could argue that historically, Christianity’s formative role in the creation of universities and the rise of natural science was a key factor in the growth of academic freedom in the West. As distinctively Christian institutions, however, CCCU schools’ understanding and practice of academic freedom sometimes varies from commonly understood practices in the mainstream academy.

The purpose of this brief document, therefore, is twofold. First, it seeks to acquaint academicians in general with the commitment to academic freedom among CCCU institutions. Second, it serves as a guide for CCCU administrators and professors regarding the common understanding and practices surrounding academic freedom that exist among our various institutions.

## The importance of academic freedom

According to the AAUP’s 1940 Statement, “the common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free expression.” As institutions that exist to promote the common good, CCCU schools share the AAUP’s commitment to academic freedom. As intentionally Christian institutions, however, our schools’ commitment to academic freedom is rooted in deeper theological sources as well. As Seattle Pacific University professor Mark Walhout asserts, Christian universities must support academic freedom, not out of a grudging acceptance of secular academic standards, but out of sincere theological conviction.<sup>ii</sup>

The biblical creation account asserts that human beings are made in God’s image, and that part of that image-bearing capacity is a sense of wonder about God’s creation and an innate desire to explore that creation. The creation narrative describes God bringing the animals to Adam to see what he would name them. This story implies a level of agency on the part of humans and a mandate to identify and understand all aspects of creation. “All truth is God’s truth” is a common expression among Christian universities and undergirds the conviction that professors and students should be given ample latitude to pursue knowledge in their disciplines.

In addition to this common understanding of academic freedom rooted in the Bible, our institutions’ particular faith traditions provide additional sources of support for freedom of inquiry. To cite just a few examples: Anabaptists believe that coercion of mind or body is unbiblical and counterproductive. Baptist educators emphasize “soul liberty,” or the competency of each individual to follow his or her conscience in religious matters. For Pentecostals, the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the mind provides a basis for scholars to arrive at fresh understandings of Scripture and creation. Reformed educators emphasize the notion of a “covenant” between professors and their universities which grants faculty freedom to pursue scholarship in their disciplines while also being committed to the beliefs and standards of the community.

Ultimately, the commitment of CCCU institutions to academic freedom is rooted in the enterprise of Christian education itself. First, we seek to form students into mature Christians who will contribute positively to the common good. In order to do so, professors need freedom in the classroom to challenge students’ assumptions and expose them to new ideas and subjects. Second, we seek the continual *re-forming* of the

church and society to more closely reflect God’s standards of justice and goodness. As such, professors require freedom in research to discover new insights and to challenge inherited systems and ideas. Academic freedom, therefore, is essential to the Christian university.

### **Limitations on academic freedom**

While academic freedom is an important feature of Christian college campuses, its value is not absolute. All universities—whether religious or secular—limit the free expression of ideas by members of the community. Public universities, for example, place limits on faculty expression out of their commitment to values of tolerance and diversity, which necessarily impinge on full academic freedom.

Another value of the academy is truth. As historian William Ringenber notes, the ultimate purpose of a university is to pursue truth; academic freedom is a means to that end rather, not an end in itself.<sup>iii</sup> Moreover, as George Marsden observes, “intellectual inquiry always takes place within the context of particular communities, traditions, and unproven assumptions.”<sup>iv</sup> Academic freedom operates within such institutional contexts and, like other elements of the academy, must be held in balance with other values.

Another way of saying this is that in a truly pluralistic society, academic freedom applies to institutions as well as individuals. University communities have the right to articulate and practice academic freedom in ways that are consistent with their particular institutional identity. Thus, for example, an institution devoted to a Great Books curriculum has the right to require intellectual commitments for its faculty that are consistent with its educational mission. Or a college for which pacifism is central to its mission has the right to hire only professors who share that conviction. Such distinctive institutions contribute to the diverse academic landscape that is one of U.S. higher education’s historic strengths.

For CCCU institutions, limitations on academic freedom stem directly from their Christian identity. The Christian understands freedom to mean not freedom *from* all constraints but rather freedom *to* love God and serve others wholeheartedly. Like other distinctive features such as chapel services or expectations that professors integrate faith and learning in their teaching, boundaries surrounding academic freedom are a natural outgrowth of our schools’ Christian commitments.

Thus, just as Christian colleges go beyond secular academia in grounding academic freedom in theological sources, so also limitations on academic freedom are rooted in Christian beliefs. For example, while the doctrine of creation provides theological grounding for academic freedom, the doctrine of human depravity supports limitations on that freedom. Christians believe that human beings are finite and fallible, limited in their understanding and subject to unknown or unacknowledged biases. Thus, Christian professors are called to exercise humility in their scholarship and teaching and to remain open to correction.

Second, Christianity emphasizes the importance of living in community. Christian universities seek to resist the fragmentation that characterizes modern universities and function as true *uni*-versities. They are, in the words of Marsden, “coherent intentional communities in which teachers and students can gather together around common ideals, goals, and aspirations.”<sup>v</sup> Members of a Christian university thus voluntarily agree to live by shared values in their pursuit of truth—values that inevitably set limits on the exercise of academic freedom.

The actual boundaries surrounding academic freedom differ and are expressed in various ways by CCCU institutions. Some institutions have developed particular doctrinal statements that all faculty affirm. Some use historic Christian creeds as their doctrinal foundation. Other institutions eschew doctrinal statements and instead require a personal affirmation of Christian faith or general support of the institution’s Christian mission. Still others practice academic freedom within the framework of a particular denominational affiliation, expressed by professors’ affirmation of denominational confessions or membership in particular churches.

Regardless of the particular form of expression, all CCCU institutions work from a realistic recognition that intellectual inquiry occurs within specific communal frameworks, and they place their commitment to academic freedom within such a context.

## Nurturing and protecting academic freedom

Because of the importance of academic freedom to university life, CCCU institutions, while setting academic freedom with institutional boundaries, also seek to protect and preserve that freedom. In fact, professors who move from a secular institution to a CCCU school often remark that they experience greater academic freedom, not less, at a Christian college. That is because Christian scholars who sincerely desire to explore the relevance of their faith to their discipline often find such efforts to be overtly or implicitly discouraged in the secular academy.<sup>vi</sup>

Nevertheless, in all academic institutions, religious or secular, academic freedom is a value that must be actively supported and protected in order to flourish. CCCU academic leaders, therefore, nurture academic freedom through the application of three values:

**Clarity:** CCCU institutions seek to articulate clearly any theological boundaries that stem from their institutional identity and to communicate those limitations in the faculty hiring process and ongoing evaluation processes. As such, they embody the language of the AAUP statement on academic freedom: “Limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be clearly stated in writing at the time of the appointment.”

**Charity:** CCCU institutions desire to be communities characterized by Christian charity in all personal interactions. Thus, if a faculty member is accused of infidelity to the ideals or beliefs of the institution, leaders of the university community seek to handle the situation with charity and extend the benefit of the doubt to that professor. Such charity also requires patience. Administrators seek to avoid rushing to conclusions and carefully investigate such charges while safeguarding the reputation of the professor during such an investigation.

**Process:** Applying charity and patience also requires that university leaders follow clear processes and procedures for dealing with accusations—processes that include faculty peer review and a right to a fair hearing for the accused. Thus, in addition to clearly communicating any limitations on academic freedom, CCCU schools also seek to follow documented processes if charges of violations of those limitations should occur.

While clarity, charity, and process govern the practice of academic freedom at CCCU institutions, we readily acknowledge the gap between aspiration and reality. Academia consists of flawed individuals and thus imperfect institutions. Sometimes professors are hired who do not properly understand or fit with an institution’s faith commitment. Charges of violations of institutional beliefs are not always adjudicated with charity, patience, and careful process. In such events, our schools seek to acknowledge such shortcomings, heal the divides in the community that may occur, and resolve to do better in the future.

As members of the academy who seek to be faithful to their Christian mission, Christian colleges and universities value academic freedom while living out a healthy balance of freedom and restraint within their particular learning communities.

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<sup>i</sup> This definition of academic freedom is adapted from Mark D. Walhout, "Academic Freedom at Christian Colleges and Universities" (1999), Winifred E. Weter Lectures, Paper 21 ([http://digitalcommons.spu.edu/weter\\_lectures/21](http://digitalcommons.spu.edu/weter_lectures/21)).

<sup>ii</sup> Walhout, p. 10.

<sup>iii</sup> William Ringenberg, *The Christian College and the Meaning of Academic Freedom* (MacMillan, 2016), Epilogue.

<sup>iv</sup> Marsden, Foreword to *The Christian College and the Meaning of Academic Freedom*.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> See, for example, Wheaton professor Robert Tracie McKenzie, <https://faithandamericanhistory.wordpress.com/why-i-am-writing/>