

# Why “Balance” Is Not Enough

This issue of *Liberal Education* features AAC&U’s new Statement on Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility, issued by the board of directors and endorsed by members at our recent annual meeting. The statement also is being sent as a separately published document to each of our member campuses.

The statement expands on the classic articulations of academic freedom, which AAC&U initially helped frame, by spelling out the relationship between academic freedom and one of the core purposes of liberal education: teaching students how to develop their own indepen-

## P R E S I D E N T ’ S M E S S A G E

dent and evidence-based judgments about complex and contested questions.

We developed the statement with two ends in view—contributing a needed dimension to the public debate, and encouraging needed improvements in practice within the academic community.

As a contribution to the public debate, the AAC&U statement addresses many of the myths and misrepresentations about both academic freedom and educational responsibilities that have been perpetuated through the insistent external campaign to encourage political oversight of teaching and learning practices on college and university campuses. In this context, we hope it provides needed correctives to a so-called public “debate” that has been intentionally framed to distort the issues and build public opposition to scholars and their work, especially work that addresses difficult public issues. The statement spells out what is required—and what is not—under the general principle of exploring multiple perspectives on specific topics.

In particular, the statement clarifies the vital role of diverse perspectives in helping students develop their own knowledge and intellectual capacities. Political critics of the academy have presented equal representation for conservative and progressive points of view as the key to quality. But the college classroom is not a talk show. Rather, it is a dedicated setting in which students and teachers seriously engage difficult and contested questions with the goal of reaching beyond differing viewpoints to a critical evaluation of the relative claims of different positions. Within this context, diversity of perspectives is a means to an end in higher education, not an end in itself. Including diversity is a step in the larger quest for new understanding and insight. But making “balanced perspectives” the sole focus of attention threatens both to distort and to seriously undermine the larger educational aims at stake.

As a contribution to the improvement of practice, the AAC&U statement spells out some of those larger educational aims in useful detail. It articulates values and needed practices that are central to students’ learning, but that are much too rarely discussed, either with

the public, or, unfortunately, with students themselves. In this context, the statement provides an opportunity for needed dialogue—and through such dialogue, for improved practice—regarding the hard work required of both students and faculty in helping students form their own independent judgment.

Cultivating critical and analytical capacities has been foundational to liberal education for a very long time. These capacities are widely prized both within the academy and among employers; they stand at the top of almost everyone’s list as core aims and outcomes of a fine education. If students leave college without these capacities, at some level, their time has been ill-spent. For these are the keys to the future—they are absolutely necessary, if not fully sufficient, to working through new problems and new challenges.

But the cultivation of critical capacities necessarily requires, in turn, far-reaching changes in the learners’ own habits of mind and dispositions. The willingness to think more deeply about an issue; the willingness to hear and engage others’ perspectives attentively; the anticipation that one’s own views may adjust in light of new insight and understanding—all these are baseline commitments for intellectual development and maturation.

Faculty members take this as a given. The importance of scholarly community and the incompleteness of knowledge and understanding are core premises of all their scholarly work and teaching. Students, however, often arrive with a much less sophisticated concept of their intellectual goals for college. In order to make the most of their college studies, many will have to break out of a naive assumption that faculty members “deliver knowledge” to them. Yet the mutual responsibilities between faculty member and students, and between students and students—the implied compact that supports serious intellectual development—is much too rarely discussed either with students or with the public. Students often are plunged into a journey whose goals and milestones they have neither examined nor embraced.

The AAC&U Statement on Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility creates an opportunity to begin that dialogue. And by opening the dialogue, it offers as well an opportunity to improve the quality of practice. Everyone participating in the work of a liberating education needs to know clearly the kind of work that is expected, and why it matters.

**The college  
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a talk show**

We hope you will both read and use this explication of the relationship between academic freedom and students’ intellectual development. We are pleased that the statement has been well received, as the responses published in these pages attest. But the real test of its value is whether you—our members—actually put it to work.

We know that some of our presidents have already shared the statement widely with faculty, staff, and students. But what we hope to hear is that it has become a point of departure for discussions between faculty and students. When the larger aims of intellectual work are better understood, it is far more likely that they will actually be achieved.

—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER