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# Academic Freedom and Artistic Expression

The statement that follows was adopted by the participants in the 1990 Wolf Trap Conference on Academic Freedom and Artistic Expression, sponsored by the American Association of University Professors, the American Council on Education, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, and the Wolf Trap Foundation. The statement was endorsed by the AAUP's Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure and by its Council at their meetings in June 1990.

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Attempts to curtail artistic presentations at academic institutions on grounds that the works are offensive to some members of the campus community and of the general public occur with disturbing frequency. Those who support restrictions argue that works presented to the public rather than in the classroom or in other entirely intramural settings should conform to their view of the prevailing community standard rather than to standards of academic freedom. We believe that, "essential as freedom is for the relation and judgment of facts, it is even more indispensable to the imagination."<sup>1</sup> In our judgment academic freedom in the creation and presentation of works in the visual and the performing arts, by ensuring greater opportunity for imaginative exploration and expression, best serves the public and the academy.

The following proposed policies are designed to assist academic institutions to respond to the issues that may arise from the presentation of artistic works to the public and to do so in a manner that preserves academic freedom:

1. *Academic Freedom in Artistic Expression.*

Faculty members and students engaged in the creation and presentation of works of the visual and the performing arts are as much engaged in pursuing the mission of the college or university as are those who write, teach, and study in other academic disciplines. Works of the visual and the performing arts are important both in their own right and because they can enhance our understanding of social institutions and the human condition. Artistic expression in the classroom, the studio, and the workshop therefore merits the same assurance of academic freedom that is accorded to other scholarly and teaching activities. Since faculty and student artistic presentations to the public are integral to their teaching, learning, and scholarship, these presentations merit no

less protection. Educational and artistic criteria should be used by all who participate in the selection and presentation of artistic works. Reasonable content-neutral regulation of the "time, place, and manner" of presentations should be developed and maintained. Academic institutions are obliged to ensure that regulations and procedures do not impair freedom of expression or discourage creativity by subjecting artistic work to tests of propriety or ideology.

2. *Accountability.* Artistic performances and exhibitions in academic institutions encourage artistic creativity, expression, learning, and appreciation. The institutions do not thereby endorse the specific artistic presentations, nor do the presentations necessarily represent the institution. This principle of institutional neutrality does not relieve institutions of general responsibility for maintaining professional and educational standards, but it does mean that institutions are not responsible for the views or the attitudes expressed in specific artistic works any more than they would be for the content of other instruction, scholarly publication, or invited speeches. Correspondingly, those who present artistic work should not represent themselves or their work as speaking for the institution and should otherwise fulfill their educational and professional responsibilities.

3. *The Audience.* When academic institutions offer exhibitions or performances to the public, they should ensure that the rights of the presenters and of the audience are not impaired by a "heckler's veto" from those who may be offended by the presentation. Academic institutions should ensure that those who choose to view an exhibition or attend a performance may do so without interference.

Mere presentation in a public place does not create a “captive audience.” Institutions may reasonably designate specific places as generally available or unavailable for exhibitions or performances.

4. *Public Funding.* Public funding for artistic presentations and for academic institutions does not diminish (and indeed may heighten) the responsibility of the university community to ensure academic freedom and of the public

to respect the integrity of academic institutions. Government imposition on artistic expression of a test of propriety, ideology, or religion is an act of censorship which impermissibly denies the academic freedom to explore, to teach, and to learn.

#### **Note**

1. Helen C. White, “Our Most Urgent Professional Task,” *AAUP Bulletin* 45 (March 1959): 282.