Statement on Academic Freedom, Censorship, and Libraries at Doane University

Doane University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors
May 3, 2019

The core mission of the American Association of University Professors and its local chapters is to protect academic freedom in higher education settings. All members have an obligation to scrutinize actions that infringe upon these freedoms and to take public stands against such actions. Given our responsibility to our core mission, the Doane University Chapter of AAUP must condemn the recent censorship of a library exhibit and the sanctions placed on Director of Library and Associate Professor of Practice Melissa Gomis. In the following, we will describe briefly the events, and explain both why removal of library displays is an act of censorship, as well as why this action and the subsequent faculty sanction are violations of professionally accepted norms of academic freedom. This type of action is a serious threat to the work of faculty and students at Doane University. However, we offer suggestions on appropriate next steps to resolve this situation and protect student learning and faculty scholarship in the future.

Timeline

In March, library staff curated an historical exhibit of photographs and other memorabilia from student scrapbooks that are housed in the Doane archives. On April 19, there was a student complaint about two of the photographs in the library display case. After talking with the student, Director Gomis made the decision to remove the particular photographs in question due to genuine concern for the student while also recognizing the current atmosphere of elevated sensitivity on many college campuses. On April 29, under orders from the Provost and Executive Vice President of Academic Affairs, the entire exhibit was taken down. Also on this date, Director Gomis was removed from campus and placed on administrative leave as a consequence of a grievance complaint about the exhibit, prior to initiation of an investigation.

Censorship

To censor means “a change in the access status of material, based on the content of the work and made by a governing authority or its representatives. Such changes include exclusion, restriction, removal, or age/grade level changes.” (American Library Association)\(^1\). The incident described here is an unambiguous example of censorship. Furthermore, when an educator is pressured to remove content from a lecture, lesson, or display that was created according to the current methods of the profession, then a violation of academic freedom has occurred. The initial act of censorship, removing two photographs that offended students, was one of self-censorship, as it was done by the library director, and was driven by her genuine concern to

\(^1\) [http://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport](http://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport)
respond to the student and to avoid external censorship. However, the second act of censorship, the removal of the entire exhibit under orders from the Provost was overt censorship coming from outside the library performed by a person with no training in library and archival science.

On April 29 President Carter emailed the entire Doane community, indicating that the exhibit was so offensive that anything similar will not be tolerated in the future, effectively advocating a policy of censorship in educational environments such as the library. Such an institutional environment, in which the content of library exhibits can be judged by the University president as sufficiently controversial or offensive that they must be removed partially or in their entirety at the president’s discretion, constitutes an infringement of the academic freedom that is essential to the work of Director Gomis, all other faculty, and, by extension, the students of the University.

**Academic Freedom**

The AAUP drafted a document in 1940 that has provided an enduring definition of Academic Freedom still in use by many institutions:

Faculty are entitled to full freedom in research and the publication of the results, subject to the adequate performance of their other academic duties.

Faculty are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but should be careful not to introduce [irrelevant] matter which has no relation to the specific subject (1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure with 1970 Interpretive Comments, in AAUP Policy Documents and Reports, 11th Edition).

Academic freedom is essential at a university for the sake of her students, as explained in a statement from the Association of American Colleges and Universities, of which Doane University is a member:

Academic freedom is necessary not just so faculty members can conduct their individual research and teach their own courses, but so they can enable students—through whole college programs of study—to acquire the learning they need to contribute to society. (2006 statement from the board of directors entitled Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility).

**The Library as a Classroom**

Some may object that a library is not a classroom and therefore librarians do not require academic freedom. However, we assert that the library is a fundamental classroom, where knowledge and learning begin. A joint statement by the AAUP and the Association of College and Research Libraries says:
College and university librarians share the professional concerns of faculty members. Academic freedom, for example, is indispensable to librarians, because they are trustees of knowledge with the responsibility of ensuring the availability of information and ideas, no matter how controversial, so that teachers may freely teach and students may freely learn. Moreover, as members of the academic community, librarians should have latitude in the exercise of their professional judgment within the library, a share in shaping policy within the institution, and adequate opportunities for professional development and appropriate reward. (Joint Statement on Faculty Status of College and University Librarians, AAUP Policy Documents and Reports, 11th Edition)

For those who suggest librarians should not be accorded the same protections as professors in the classroom, it should be noted that librarians are particularly vulnerable to sanctions resulting from public disapproval of their collections and exhibits. Librarians are responsible for presenting and making available to others an enormous range of materials that inevitably will include items that some, and perhaps even many, will find objectionable. In addition, unlike professors in a dynamic classroom discussion, they cannot respond instantly to questions or reactions from their audience, or explain in the moment their decision-making process in presenting such materials. To complicate matters even further, decisions by a librarian to move or modify a collection in response to one person’s heartfelt concern can just as easily elicit criticism from other individuals, who will then assert that such a decision does harm to other parties. Thus, they are in some ways an easy and inviting target, potentially inviting often public criticism for acting, as well as for not acting. But they MUST be allowed to exercise their professional discretion while making the numerous decisions necessary to present such varied collections, and to do so without fear of retaliation from the university administration. Administrators, in particular, should be sympathetic to the incredibly difficult position librarians are in.

The above conclusion is supported by the following statement from the American Library Association’s Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights (ALA):

7. Freedom of information and of creative expression should be reflected in library exhibits and in all relevant library policy documents.

Consequences of a Limited Academic Freedom Policy

Further, the AAUP states

Instruction cannot proceed in the atmosphere of fear that would be produced were a teacher to become subject to administrative sanction based upon the idiosyncratic reaction of one or more students. This would create a classroom environment inimical to the free and vigorous exchange of ideas necessary for teaching and learning in higher education. (Report on Freedom in The Classroom, AAUP Policy Documents and Reports, 11th Edition)
In a university setting, materials presented in a classroom, library, library exhibit space, theater, or art gallery will often be provocative, with the reactions from students and faculty spanning a range of emotions, including offense and discomfort. Indeed, it seems quite reasonable to many to use the degree of offense as a guide for determining whether library content should be removed. However, the initial and genuine relief gained from censoring offensive content in one area of the university can quickly generate serious, alarming consequences in other areas. Will faculty or students who make offensive theater productions or draw controversial images presented in the university art gallery be sanctioned if administrators conclude that insufficient commentary, context, or framing was provided? Will students who choose controversial topics for their research be required to modify or take down their research posters? Will student newspaper editors be sanctioned for posting controversial photos if an administrator believes the newspaper did not provide adequate commentary to prevent emotional distress? Such consequences are foreseeable extensions of the type of action taken in the matter at hand.

For these reasons, we condemn in the strongest possible terms the actions taken by the Provost and the President of Doane University. It is our expectation that Director Gomis will be reinstated without prejudice and with no further actions taken against her in this matter, effective immediately. After that, we would welcome the chance to engage in dialogue with any interested parties about the principles of academic freedom and why they are integral to Doane University’s mission and reputation as an institution of higher learning.

Approved by ballot by the Doane University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors on May 3, 2019