

This document offers guidance, in the nature of a series of principles of best practices, regarding faculty use of social media resources in their research and scholarship, teaching, and in their private life, in light of academic freedom concerns.

The AAUP Perspective:

In a 2004 committee report titled *Academic Freedom and Electronic Communications*, the AAUP stated as a core principle that, “Academic freedom, free inquiry, and freedom of expression within the academic community may be limited to no greater extent in electronic format than they are in print...” As this statement was made before the advent of social media, the AAUP revised and updated this report in 2014 [<http://www.aaup.org/report/academic-freedom-and-electronic-communications-2014>].

The need for the AAUP to address social media as new form of electronic communication was spurred by a number of recent high-profile cases of academics being censured by their institutions as a result of statements posted on popular social media sites. Of great concern is the fact that, in many cases, these statements were intended as speech by private citizens voicing social and/or political commentary in the public sphere. The 2014 AAUP report refers to such speech as “extramural utterances” and states that such utterances on social media or elsewhere are fully encompassed under the principles of academic freedom; “Professors should also have the freedom to address the larger community with regard to any matter of social, political, economic, or other interest, without institutional discipline or restraint, save in response to fundamental violations of professional ethics or statements that suggest disciplinary incompetence.”

The Situation at Pitt:

Concerned by the spate of recent challenges to academic freedom at other US academic centers, Pitt’s Tenure and Academic Freedom Committee (TAFC) formed a subcommittee in April 2014 to address these concerns and look into existing university policies governing speech and electronic communications to determine if adjustments were necessary. The subcommittee’s examination revealed that Pitt’s current policies regarding academic freedom and speech were sufficiently strong and broad and that no revisions were required.

Pitt’s commitment to academic freedom, especially in the context of speech, is best captured in former Provost James Maher’s 2002 statement on the subject (<http://www.pitt.edu/~provost/update.html>). At the outset of this document, there is an endorsement of the AAUP principle that “Teachers are entitled to speak and write as private citizens, free from institutional censorship or discipline, but as scholars and educational officers they should at all times be accurate, exercise appropriate restraint, show respect for the opinions of others, and make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the university.” With regard to faculty member’s expressing their opinions, the following passage applies: “Academic neutrality does not mean that scholars are expected to be “neutral” in regard to truth, knowledge, or the accuracy of their research methods and results; nor is it intended to

prevent them from taking controversial positions in regard to social and political issues.” Provost Maher’s statement closes with the following powerful pronouncement: “Even as debate over these issues continues on campuses and in the courts, the University of Pittsburgh aggressively endorses the longstanding understanding of academic freedom as discussed above. The University has been and remains determined to resist any infringement of these principles from any source.”

These affirmative statements provided the subcommittee with assurance that Pitt is fully committed to protecting the academic freedom of its faculty. However, one conclusion of the TAFC subcommittee was that greater guidance for the Pitt faculty body was warranted, with respect to social media use and electronic communications in general.

The nature of social media makes it difficult to predict how one’s electronic posts are shared beyond one’s intended audience or even, at times, how one’s intended audience might understand those posts. These digital distribution platforms can also appear to blur lines between faculty members’ speech as private citizens and as teachers and scholars. While the classroom has been broadened to include more than just the physical space in which the formal class is conducted, the principles of academic freedom apply to the virtual classroom as well (Courseweb, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.). While the Web, social media, and other technologies have changed how faculty speech is transmitted, the University of Pittsburgh’s commitment to protecting academic freedom has not wavered. With that in mind, our faculty can minimize potential misunderstandings by students and the public by adopting some best practices for social media use and other electronic communications.

The subcommittee’s findings and recommendations were presented to the Faculty Assembly on November 5, 2014

(http://www.univsenate.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/Nov%205%202014%20FA%20Minutes_0.pdf).

The final report of the subcommittee was unanimously approved by the TAFC on February 5, 2015 and by the Faculty Assembly on February 10, 2015 (all in favor except four abstentions).

Best practices for faculty electronic communications

(some adapted from the AAUP report: <http://www.aaup.org/report/academic-freedom-and-electronic-communications-2014>)

- The AAUP report recommends that faculty members “[s]egregate, as much as possible, personal from professional correspondence and also segregate correspondence that concerns university business from other professional correspondence, such as work for scholarly publications and organizations.” This recommendation has implications for both email correspondence and social media activity. When possible, faculty members should consider keeping separate email and social media accounts for official university-related business and private use. Faculty requiring or encouraging social media for the purposes of a class should separate class use from their own personal use.
- Faculty members should treat all email associated with their university accounts as potentially public due to possible Freedom of Information Act requests.

- Faculty members are strongly encouraged to incorporate a statement in course syllabi reminding students of the university policy on recording classes: "To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom or recitation lectures, discussion, and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use."
- When posting on social media sites or other online forums, faculty members should exercise reasonable precautions to avoid the appearance that they are speaking on behalf of the university, unless otherwise authorized to do so [\[https://www.policy.pitt.edu/ac-03-academic-responsibilities-and-professional-conduct-formerly-02-04-02\]](https://www.policy.pitt.edu/ac-03-academic-responsibilities-and-professional-conduct-formerly-02-04-02). This applies equally to activities on private accounts (e.g., a faculty member's personal social media account or blog) and university-sanctioned accounts (e.g., social media accounts associated with a course). When it is reasonable to do so, consider removing identifiers of your university affiliation and title from personal social media accounts and, in the case of accounts where one's university affiliation will be visible, consider including a disclaimer indicating that your views are your own and do not reflect those of the university. It is understood that the ability to add such disclaimers depends on the form of social media in question.
- When posting electronic communications (e.g. on blogs, social media sites, forums, webpages etc.) as a private citizen (not in a role as a university employee) it is recommended to do so using devices and networks not owned by the university. It is always advisable to use privately owned devices and outside networks. See <https://www.policy.pitt.edu/ao-10-computer-access-and-use-formerly-10-02-05>.
- When directing students to websites (personal or otherwise) for course materials, be aware that they may inadvertently encounter other pages and materials, some of which students may find controversial or potentially disturbing (e.g., commercial materials or advertisements, politically partisan materials, or sexually explicit materials).
- The University encourages its faculty members to be actively engaged citizens, both in the public and private sphere, which at times may include taking part in discourse on controversial political, social, scientific and/or philosophical issues. With this as context, faculty should always strive to exercise reasonable judgment, mutual respect, and restraint in all communications, electronic or otherwise. See <http://www.pitt.edu/~provost/update.html> and <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/notice-nondiscrimination-and-anti-harassment-policy-statement>.

Note: links updated 12/15/2021