

## **Intellectual Pluralism and Academic Freedom**

The University System of Georgia and Valdosta State University subscribe to the statement below by the American Council on Education.

### **Statement on Academic Rights and Responsibilities American Council on Education**

Intellectual pluralism and academic freedom are central principles of American higher education. Recently, these issues have captured the attention of the media, political leaders and those in the academy. This is not the first time in the nation's history that these issues have become public controversies, but the current interest in intellectual discourse on campus suggests that the meaning of these terms, and the rights and responsibilities of individual members of the campus community, should be reiterated.

Without question, academic freedom and intellectual pluralism are complex topics with multiple dimensions that affect both students and faculty. Moreover, America's colleges and universities vary enormously, making it impossible to create a single definition or set of standards that will work equally well for all fields of academic study and all institutions in all circumstances. Individual campuses must give meaning and definition to these concepts within the context of disciplinary standards and institutional mission.

Despite the difficulty of prescribing a universal definition, we believe that there are some central, overarching principles that are widely shared within the academic community and deserve to be stated affirmatively as a basis for discussion of these issues on campuses and elsewhere.

- American higher education is characterized by a great diversity of institutions, each with its own mission and purpose. This diversity is a central feature and strength of our colleges and universities and must be valued and protected. The particular purpose of each school, as defined by the institution itself, should set the tone for the academic activities undertaken on campus.
- Colleges and universities should welcome intellectual pluralism and the free exchange of ideas. Such a commitment will inevitably encourage debate over complex and difficult issues about which individuals will disagree. Such discussions should be held in an environment characterized by openness, tolerance and civility.
- Academic decisions including grades should be based solely on considerations that are intellectually relevant to the subject matter under consideration. Neither students nor faculty should be disadvantaged or evaluated on the basis of their political opinions. Any member of the campus community who believes he or she has been treated unfairly on academic matters must have access to a clear institutional process by which his or her grievance can be addressed. [See appeal process below.]

- The validity of academic ideas, theories, arguments and views should be measured against the intellectual standards of relevant academic and professional disciplines. Application of these intellectual standards does not mean that all ideas have equal merit. The responsibility to judge the merits of competing academic ideas rests with colleges and universities and is determined by reference to the standards of the academic profession as established by the community of scholars at each institution.
- Government's recognition and respect for the independence of colleges and universities is essential for academic and intellectual excellence. Because colleges and universities have great discretion and autonomy over academic affairs, they have a particular obligation to ensure that academic freedom is protected for all members of the campus community and that academic decisions are based on intellectual standards consistent with the mission of each institution.

The following organizations have endorsed this statement:

- American Association of Community Colleges
- American Association of State Colleges and Universities
- American Association of University Professors
- American Council on Education
- American Dental Education Association
- American Political Science Association
- Association of American Colleges and Universities
- Association of American Law Schools
- Association of American Universities
- Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities
- Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges
- Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers
- Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities
- The College Board
- College Student Educators International
- College and University Professional Association for Human Resources
- Council for Advancement and Support of Education
- Council for Christian Colleges and Universities
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation
- Council for Opportunity in Education
- Council of Graduate Schools
- Council of Independent Colleges
- EDUCAUSE
- National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
- National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges
- National Association of Student Personnel Administrators
- University Continuing Education Association

Further statements on these matters and related topics are contained in the following VSU documents:

- *Statutes* (Academic Freedom)
- *Faculty Handbook* (Academic Code of Professional Ethics)
- *Student Handbook* (Equal Opportunity Statement)
- *Undergraduate Catalog* (Grade Appeals)
- *Graduate Catalog* (Academic Regulations)

## Appeals Process

VSU has long had an appeals process in place to help students and faculty resolve any issues with the assignment of a grade. This process endeavors to protect both faculty and students by assuring a process that allows dialogue at each step. While the initial appeal may be informal (i.e. a conversation between the faculty member and the student), if the situation is not resolved, the rest of the process occurs in writing, as in the Final Course Grade Appeal Form, available from the Registrar's Office.

The same process should be followed if a situation arises in a class prior to the assignment of grades. VSU recognizes, as the ACE statement above maintains, "Academic decisions including grades should be based solely on considerations that are intellectually relevant to the subject matter under consideration. Neither students nor faculty should be disadvantaged or evaluated on the basis of their political opinions. Any member of the campus community who believes he or she has been treated unfairly on academic matters must have access to a clear institutional process by which his or her grievance can be addressed." If students feel uncomfortable addressing issues involving intellectual pluralism with the instructors, they should seek the advice of the VSU Alternative Dispute Resolution Committee (c/o Rebecca Murphy, 229.259.5105) who can assist in helping both the student and the faculty member in addressing their concerns.

The following is the appeals process for all academic concerns, including issues of academic freedom and intellectual pluralism:

*From the VSU Undergraduate Catalogue and the Student Handbook:*

Students who have just cause to appeal the assignment of a grade [or what they perceive as a problematic course situation] must first discuss the problem with their professor. Further appeals are then directed, in order, to their professor's Department Head, Dean, and the Vice President for Academic Affairs. . . .

*From the VSU Final Course Grade Appeal Form (available from the Office of the Registrar)*

**Policy (also see VSU catalog):** The evaluation of academic work is the prerogative of the instructor and the rules for determining final course grades should be established by the

instructor and given to the students in a course syllabus at the beginning of the semester. A student who believes grounds exist for an appeal of a final course grade must first consult informally with the instructor.

The grade appeal procedure is not to be used to review the judgment of an instructor in assessing the quality of a student's work. Possible grounds for an appeal are items such as the following:

- (a) An error in the calculation of the grade.
- (b) The assignment of a grade to a particular student by application of more exacting requirements than were applied to other students in the course.
- (c) The assignment of a grade to a particular student on some basis other than performance in the course.
- (d) The assignment of a grade by a departure from the instructor's previously announced standards.

Students who believe they have a case for a grade appeal must follow this process:

- (1) Instructor:** First discuss the appeal with the instructor responsible for the grade assigned. If the matter is not resolved, the appeal shall continue as follows:
- (2) Instructor's Department Head**
- (3) Dean of the College or Director of Division** in which the course was taught.
- (4)** (for graduate courses) **Dean of the Graduate School**
- (5) Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs.**

**The instructor will require time to review the material before rendering a decision on the appeal. After the instructor has had the chance to review the appeal, the instructor and the student should meet to discuss it. If the appeal is not resolved at this level, the next level is the department head.**