

Cultivating Academic Freedom and Dissent in the Classroom

AAUP-AFT and Adjunct Faculty Union Academic Freedom Committees, January 2025

Goal: To cultivate a classroom environment where dissent is normal, healthy, and productive, and students and faculty alike are free to express their views.

Note: There are robust differences between disciplines; please adapt as needed.

Things to Do:

- Acknowledge difficult subjects as such. Some topics are more likely than others to prompt students to feel challenged, even upset. Simply stating that fact can help prepare students to recognize their difficulty in considering certain subjects as part of the learning process, rather than as impassable obstacles.
- Tell students to expect disagreement and debate in your classroom. Some professors prefer to lay ground rules aimed at ensuring calm discussions, whereas others prefer to host lively exchanges. Either approach is fine, and both work best when students are aware of the instructor's rules and their explicit goal to foster debate.
- Focus disagreements on ideas, not people. Ad hominem attacks are never welcome, and you, as the instructor, can help students understand the difference between a personal assault versus a legitimate (even if fierce) attack on an idea or position.
- Recognize that you, as the instructor, hold a position of authority in the classroom. Consider this when evaluating how to best engage in classroom discussions. You are free, as the instructor, to voice your views on issues in class, even in strong language, although you should consider the pedagogical implications of doing so.

Things Not to Do:

- Do not penalize students for disagreeing with you as the instructor.
- Do not try to interfere with another professor's academic freedom. Academic freedom includes huge leeway for different pedagogical approaches, and the resulting variety creates a healthy, diverse learning environment at Rutgers. Don't try to tell other instructors that they must teach or approach sensitive issues the exact way that you do.
- Don't act inequitably toward students in class. For example, if you allow students to miss class without consequences in order to support a particular political position, make sure you give students on the other side the same courtesy.
- Don't tell students that all views are equal. Viewpoint discrimination is an important part of academic work, such as scientists rejecting creationist theory. Students can and should be taught to weigh different points of view and evaluate them appropriately.