

Press Conference on Free Speech. August 26, 2024

My name is Barbara Dennis, Professor in the School of Education and member of the Progressive Faculty and Staff Caucus.

The U.S. Supreme court has determined that academic freedom is a first amendment right at public universities. Indeed, progressive scholars have long argued that academic freedom is the cornerstone of the modern university, formulated against potential or actual intellectual repression at the hands of politicians, religious leaders, or the moods of the community. The erosion of academic freedom at public universities ushers in the institutional destruction of free inquiry, social scientific progress, and the advancement of the humanities.

Universities and professors would not need academic freedom if they were not going to assign banned books. If they were only going to teach the status quo. If they were never going to propose an unpopular idea. If they were only going to talk about facts the government approved. If they were never going to present a controversial argument. If they were not going to try out avante garde pedagogies. You get the point.

In 1938 soon after Hermann B Wells became IU's President he argued that Indiana University would only succeed if it provided faculty with the means and *freedom* to do their work. IU set the example. In the 1940s, support for academic freedom was necessary to advance the study of sexual behavior and desires.ⁱ At that time, sexual research and knowledge was considered scandalous and immoral. Alfred Kinsey needed academic freedom, BUT HE ALSO NEEDED a university president willing to fight for that freedom. Wells staunchly and repeatedly defended Kinsey's research against its many detractors and naysayers. His support did not depend on whether or not he agreed with Kinsey's conclusions. Wells said, *"The University believes that the human race has been able to make progress because individuals have been free to investigate all aspects of life."*ⁱⁱⁱ Because of academic freedom at IU, sexual knowledge and study were loosened from the grip of moral and political voices to become an academic discipline of its own.

But, now, in 2024, Indiana's state Attorney General says that academic freedom is a threat to the running of the governmentⁱⁱⁱ. Such double speak pretends that the government needs protection from public universities rather than the other way around. So, once again, IU is in a fight for academic freedom.

Unfortunately for us, President Whitten is NO Hermann B Wells. Free inquiry and expression are not fostered by defining and punishing the boundaries of speech. Instead, as Wells knew, they are fostered by identifying and resourcing the conditions for their success.

What IS IT that academic freedom protects in my teaching and research? Here is one small example. When I taught undergraduate multicultural education courses for pre-service teachers, I routinely invited a panel of LGBTQIA+ IU community members to share their k-12 schooling experiences with my students. One time, in the class session just preceding the one for which the panel was scheduled, a student interrupted me by saying, "You can't let them in here. They're gonna try to change us. It's against my religion. You can't force me to change my opinion." Students like this were resisting change—literally asserting a RIGHT not to change. In this situation, what would we consider to be my scholarly responsibilities to the field of education and its students? Am I to support the comfort of students who admit they do not want my class to change them? Am I to force them to "change" their opinion for the sake of passing my class? It must NOT be *either* of those.

Academic freedom fosters my responsibility to provide students with ***an opportunity to change, an opportunity*** to reflect on their opinions, and ***an opportunity*** to examine scholarship in the field, ***an opportunity to engage/learn anew*** (and so on) regardless of ultimately what they do with those opportunities. Academic freedom fosters my capacity to reframe the student's resistance in a way that reflects contemporary best practices and knowledges and to raise questions that the student might use pursuant to their own opinions. The outburst in my class assumed that it was wrong of me to require students to attend a session where LGBTQ members of our IU community were given the floor. I re-situated how the panel was being framed by the student. I asked the learners to consider how this panel might help them become the best teachers possible for their future LGBTQ+ k-12 students, no matter what their opinions were. By comparison, I did not specifically or routinely invite a panel of cisgendered straight folks to come to my class to share their k-12 schooling experiences. The problem with saying that somehow the k-12 experiences of straight students deserve the same space in the class has everything to do with the multicultural education scholarship, not with student comfort or intellectual diversity masquerading as inclusion. It's fundamentally different to ask a group of LGBTQ or disabled or Black or Muslim or Jewish students to share their k-12 experiences with future teachers than it is to ask a group of straight cis-gendered students to share theirs. Understanding why these are different is part of the point of the multicultural education course itself. AND it is the jury of my scholarly peers that should have (and traditionally has had) a say in whether, or not, such decisions reflect the research, knowledge, and contours of a progressing field. The status quo cannot suffice as the litmus test for valid and free inquiry. Retaining the status quo as a goal in and of itself is anti-educational. If the status quo stands up to free inquiry, then it earns its place in that moment of scholarly history precisely because it was subjected to free inquiry.

Relatedly, I have been publishing research with LGBTQIA+ youth for over a decade from my position at IU and with institutional funding. But now that the state has passed anti-trans laws aimed at youth and their families, academic freedom is a MUST for continuing my work with the very people whose well-being is now purposefully and directly threatened by government action. It's not the government that needs protection. And most certainly not from scholars exercising academic freedom. With the enactment of 202 and its interpretation under the Whitten administration, my teaching and scholarly decisions will not be as protected as Alfred Kinsey's were in the 1940s. We're here to protect IU from 202.

ⁱ Kinsey Institute was founded in 1947 as the Institute for Sex Research renamed in 1981.

ⁱⁱ Wells issued this public statement in 1953 when the second volume of Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* was released.

ⁱⁱⁱ See the ACLU case against SEA 202.