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OPINION - Guest writer

Free to speak

Academic freedom on campus

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By Jeremy Horpedahl, David Mitchell, Thomas Snyder and Zack Donohew Special to the Democrat-Gazette
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Is academic freedom under attack? Troubling reports of the suppression of free expression are coming from universities across the nation. Examples include at least 29 "disinvitations" of campus speakers in 2017 alone, according to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. Professors have been pressured to limit their speech at schools as diverse as Evergreen State College and Yale University. And much closer to home, proposed changes to the tenure policy in the University of Arkansas system could have a chilling effect on academic freedom.

Fortunately, at the University of Central Arkansas academic freedom remains alive and well, and we write to praise President Houston Davis and the Board of Trustees for being good stewards of academic freedom. It's always good, however, to reaffirm first principles and discuss why it's so important to protect academic inquiry, especially in the face of opposition. UCA is not part of the UA system and is unaffected by any changes they make to tenure policy.

The right to research and speak about controversial ideas is the core of the ideal of a university. Without academic freedom for faculty and students, a university could be a vocational school, a year-round camp, or an athletics training facility. But it's much more. Universities must push the boundaries of science, our understanding of human nature, and public policy. If not us, who?

"The right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable," is how the famous Woodward Report put it in 1975 in response to increasing attacks on academic freedom. Written by faculty at Yale University, it stressed that these freedoms apply to research and teaching of university faculty "not only within its walls but with the world beyond." As a private university, Yale is under no legal obligation to respect academic freedom, but it does so out of respect for a long tradition of the importance of free expression. As a public university, UCA is bound by both tradition and constitutional requirements.

Academic freedom matters. We say so not just as university professors, but also as academics who frequently work on topics of public policy through the Arkansas Center for Research in Economics. Public policy is always contentious. Academics have important contributions to make through our own research and summarizing the research of others when it relates to public policy in Arkansas. Few academics would do difficult and sustained research if they did not think that their research might move the world in a better direction.

Just because ideas should never be silenced does not mean they should not be debated and challenged. On the contrary! Students and faculty and even persons outside of academia such as business groups and lawmakers may take issue with academic research and policy recommendations. And when they do they should be vocal about it. Society benefits from such dialogue. We all lose those benefits, though, when those voices attempt to suppress that dialogue.

UCA's faculty handbook affirms the protection of academic freedom, and states that it is "fundamental to the advancement of truth." And the diversity of organizations and views on campus

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show this commitment to academic freedom by President Davis, former President Tom Courtway, and the board of UCA. The Center for Community and Economic Development; the Corrections, Culture, and Career Lab; the Confucius Institute; ACRE; and other university centers hold a myriad of different and sometimes opposing viewpoints. This should be celebrated, not silenced.

John Stuart Mill, the famous British philosopher, remains one of the most influential thinkers on free expression and its limits. He believed that protection is needed both for the speakers of new ideas and for the listeners so they can hear those ideas--especially if they are controversial or unorthodox. Mill says, "However true [an opinion] may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth." When speech is suppressed, the truth cannot do its work.

No one wants to be wrong, especially about things that are important to them, but we are all wrong about some things. The only way to discover our own errors and to educate others is by making the strongest, clearest cases we can for the things we believe and hoping that others will help us to see what we have missed.

Academic freedom is an important part of discovering truth. Because of the legal protections and cultural understanding of the importance of the free exchange of ideas, academics can work to improve on the ideas of those that came before us so those who come after will have the liveliest truths to explore.

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Jeremy Horpedahl, David Mitchell, Thomas Snyder, and Zack Donohew teach economics at the University of Central Arkansas, and produce research for both UCA and the Arkansas Center for Research in Economics. The views expressed here are their own and are not an official statement of UCA or ACRE.

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