

Guest Speakers in the Classroom: Guidelines for Orderly Expression and Safety

Approved by the Faculty Senate, December 6, 2017

Freedom of expression and academic freedom are fundamental rights supported by the Faculty Senate in its [Resolution on Freedom of Expression](#). These rights, and the right to reasonable dissent, are upheld by American University in its [Guidelines for Freedom of Expression and Dissent](#).

Faculty are encouraged to invite guest speakers to their classrooms, including those that may present controversial viewpoints. The following guidelines provide measures for the safety of faculty, students, and guests in these cases.

Notifications

Although the potential for controversy is not always evident, faculty are encouraged to consider whether an invited speaker may be perceived as controversial. If so, they are advised to notify by email, preferably at least two weeks in advance of such an event, the relevant Department Chair, Division or Program Director, or Dean and, if determined appropriate in consultation with such administrators, the Department of Public Safety. The Dean of Faculty can serve as an optional resource in this process, as described below.

Inside the Classroom

a. Student Responsibilities

As stated in American University's Academic Rules and Regulations, 12.1.3, "students must be registered in order to participate in a class." Only those students who are enrolled in a course may be present for any class meeting, including those with guest speakers.

It is foreseeable that students enrolled in a course to which a guest speaker is invited might attempt to interfere with speech they deem controversial or offensive. A speaker is nonetheless entitled to communicate their message. Students are not permitted to interfere with a speaker's ability to communicate or with the ability by students and faculty to see and hear the speaker. On the other hand, the right to reasonable dissent must be respected. Displaying a sign, wearing significant/symbolic clothing, gesturing, standing, or otherwise protesting noiselessly is allowed unless the protest interferes with the students' view or prevents them from hearing the speaker. Any use of signs, prolonged standing, or other activities likely to block the view of anyone in the room must be confined to the back. Chanting or making other sustained or repeated noise in a manner that substantially interferes with the speaker's communication is not permitted. Distributing literature inside the classroom is allowed before class begins and after it ends.

A student who substantially interferes with acceptable dissent violates these guidelines in the same way as dissenters who violate the rights of the speaker or audience.

b. Faculty Responsibilities

As with others in the classroom, faculty members must allow academic freedom and free speech by speakers and students, and they have the right to exercise academic freedom and free speech when responding to speakers and students. They may not interfere with the rights of others who are acting within the parameters of reasonable dissent as described above, and they too may exercise reasonable dissent. While acknowledging that mitigating circumstances may arise, faculty are strongly encouraged

to build a question-and-answer period into these class meetings to advance educational objectives. Asking questions of the speaker in a civil, orderly way is encouraged.

Moderator/Facilitator

The faculty member may wish to consider the use of a moderator or facilitator to help preserve these rights for all. If so, the person selected must be perceived as neutral and non-partisan. The moderator/facilitator will generally be a member of the University faculty or administration. During the class meeting, the moderator/facilitator must stress that his/her presence reflects no position for or against the views of the speaker, sponsoring organization, faculty member, or students. Final decisions regarding balancing the rights of the speaker with the rights of those who disagree will be made by the moderator/facilitator. This person will have authority over decisions, including, but not limited to: whether to eject a disrupter from the room, whether to declare a class period over, or whether to cancel the class meeting for safety reasons.

Outside the Classroom

Dissent by individuals not enrolled in the course is limited to activity outside the classroom and must not impede access to the classroom or substantially interfere with communication inside. Picketing in an orderly way or distributing literature outside the classroom is acceptable unless it impedes access to the event. Noise outside the classroom that substantially interferes with communication inside the classroom is not permitted.

Force or Violence

Using or threatening force or violence, such as defacing a sign or assaulting a speaker or person present in or invited to the classroom is never permitted. Any interference with freedom of movement or with freedom from force or violence is a serious violation of personal rights. Such interference may result in arrest or forcible removal from the classroom and violation of relevant policies.

Resources

[The Dean of Faculty](#) will serve as an optional resource for consultation about potentially controversial speakers.

[AU Connects](#) is a campus-wide inclusion initiative that provides trained facilitators who can help guide constructive conversations around issues of race and ethnicity. Facilitators can help the campus engage in more regular conversations related to race and ethnicity to reduce this avoidance and build a stronger community.

[The Center for Teaching, Research and Learning](#) (CTRL) is a space for faculty to share their experiences in the classroom and across campus in the spirit of promoting open dialogue and reflection.

[The Department of Public Safety](#) ensures an atmosphere of safety and security that fosters and promotes the university's educational mission. A number of resources are available.