



The Society for the Study of Social Problems

Publishers of the Journal *Social Problems*

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October 10, 2023

Joya Misra, Ph.D.
President, American Sociological Association
Provost Professor and Roy J. Zuckerberg Endowed Leadership Chair
Sociology Department
University of Massachusetts
200 Hicks Way
Amherst, Massachusetts 01003

Dear Dr. Misra:

I am writing on behalf of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) to request that the American Sociological Association (ASA) join us in publishing a statement affirming the need to protect academic freedom from government interference.

As you know, many states have introduced and/or passed legislation restricting faculty from teaching theories and research that present inequalities as operating through social structures and institutions. This legislation is an attack on our discipline, and it has created vulnerability among sociologists and sociology departments.

We acknowledge that ASA has taken some measures to respond to these legislative attacks. ASA signed the *ACLS Statement In Support of Academic Freedom and New College of Florida*, and offers support for individual sociologists to write op-eds to inform voters of the importance of academic freedom.

Still, we believe an official statement from the ASA verifying the scientific validity of structural and institutional inequality is important for protecting individual faculty and our discipline as a whole. Many sociologists work in states where legislation restricting academic freedom is already in effect. These individuals and their entire programs are vulnerable, and therefore need institutional backing and support from their national organizations.

We hope you will join us in publishing a statement. We have included a copy of our current statement, which we invite you to use in whole or in part.

In solidarity,

Dr. Elroi J. Windsor
Executive Officer

Enclosure

Society for the Study of Social Problems
Statement Opposing State Interference with Academic Freedom

Students and faculty who attend institutions of higher education in the United States enter a community of inquiry that encourages all parties to engage with ideas and philosophies different than their own. The value of an education is built on student intellectual curiosity that is only developed in conjunction with the mutually recognized right of individuals to express different vantage points and belief systems, and to be exposed to new ways of thinking in return. Such an environment requires that faculty have the freedom to share ideas, concepts, scholarship, and belief systems, as long as they do not reinforce historical oppressive structures and ideologies. Personal and societal growth depend on the free exchange of ideas, and academic freedom is paramount to faculty's ability to teach and foster critical thinking within their areas of expertise.

Yet, legislators in several states seek to curtail the academic freedom of faculty and educators at all levels of education, with higher education being the primary battlefields. Bills have been introduced and/or passed into law that seek to limit instruction on certain topics. Although the attacks on Critical Race Theory have garnered the most media coverage, legislation also attempts to restrict teaching theories and research that present inequalities such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc., as well as the intersections of these systems, as operating through social structures and institutions. State interference in the production and/or dissemination of academic knowledge is a threat to democracy and the advancement of society.

The premise that social power and inequality are embedded in and reproduced through social systems and institutions is established through decades of multidisciplinary scientific research by researchers throughout the world. The production of scientific knowledge contains within it a durable set of checks and balances to ameliorate personal opinion and bias, including adherence to rigorous methods of data collection and analysis, anonymity in the review process, replication of significant findings, and triangulation of results across multiple studies. Consequently, the structural and institutional basis of social privilege and oppression is established and foundational knowledge in the human sciences; it is not a reflection of a single study or personal opinion of an individual professor.

Social science research methods demonstrate the benefits of diversity in its many forms – intellectual, organizational and otherwise – as well as the reproduction of inequitable systems when diverse representation and dialogue is prohibited. Students who engage with peers from different backgrounds and different viewpoints benefit from enhanced creativity, critical thinking skills, and deeper learning – skills that not only translate to their working lives, but also promote possibilities for social change.

We at the Society for the Study of Social Problems publicly denounce any attempts to limit academic freedom and pedagogy and stand in solidarity with our colleagues whose academic freedom is threatened or has been curtailed. We support institutional initiatives to diversify faculty, staff, and student bodies, as diversity benefits all organizational members. We assert the right to open dialogue as central to scientific and societal progress and to the creation of a more equitable society.