
Ad Hoc Committee on Boycotts and Academic Freedom Report

The Ad Hoc Committee on Boycotts and Academic Freedom was charged in May 2014 with “developing general guidelines for evaluating and responding to calls for University-wide participation in boycotts and other coordinated sanctions against any particular outside entity.” In brief, it is the committee’s view that academic boycotts usually pose threats to academic freedom. They should be very rare, undertaken only after extensive deliberation involving broad input from campus members and with full consideration of possible harm to faculty, staff, and students at UW-Madison, not least of which is the potential limitation of academic freedom.

Boycotts can take many different forms, generally with the intent of having economic, political, or other effects on a specific entity. In this report we discuss only academic boycotts. We define academic boycotts to be any form of protest or punishment whereby the UW-Madison faculty withdraw from cooperation with another academic institution. These have encompassed institution-wide action (e.g. when libraries have withdrawn from participating in interlibrary loan programs with an identified entity), or have enforced limits on the activities of individual faculty members (e.g. restricting faculty members from visiting another institution, collaborating with colleagues from another institution, accepting funding from another institution, hosting a visitor from another institution, etc.).

The focus in this report is to provide perspective and guidance on motions for academic boycotts. Such motions are a matter for which the Faculty Senate has responsibility and authority, as defined in Faculty Policies and Procedures 1.20 and 2.01. Our deliberations were guided by the extent to which academic boycotts are consistent with the tenets of academic freedom, as defined in FPP 8.01.B.

The guidelines proposed herein are based on the following general principles:

- We note FPP 8.01.A: “Members of the faculty individually enjoy and exercise all rights secured to them by the Constitutions of the United States and the State of Wisconsin, *and by the principles of academic freedom ...*” (emphasis added). We believe that those rights are very important. The risk of curtailing academic freedom dictates that boycotts by the UW-Madison faculty should be rare. At the same time, individuals have the right to act on their own to boycott an entity if they so choose.
- The abridgment of academic freedom by an entity does not by itself justify abridgment of academic freedom by the UW-Madison faculty
- The default position is not to boycott, and ordinarily there is no need to have a motion to not support a boycott. Not deciding to boycott, or deciding not to boycott, should not be construed as support for the identified entity. Such actions may, instead, be properly interpreted as an indication of the higher value placed on expressions of free speech rights, the principle of academic freedom, or both.
- There is a presumption against boycotting entities for engaging in activities that are legal and common practice within the UW-Madison community.

The following questions should guide the consideration of any motion to boycott an entity.

- What is the proposed boycott about? What is the intended effect of the boycott, and why does the offending matter merit an action, with the potential of curtailing academic freedom as opposed to a statement of protest or condemnation? How likely is it that the desired effect of a boycott will be achieved?
- Does the proposed boycott fall within the purview of the Faculty Senate, and to what extent is it enforceable? Does the proposal entail the boycott of an action that is legal and common practice in the UW-Madison community?
- How will a proposed boycott limit academic freedom for UW-Madison faculty members? How will it affect the ability of faculty members to conduct and present their scholarly work in the manner that best serves their needs as scholars? How will it affect the ability to teach students?
- What are the additional consequences for UW-Madison students, staff, and faculty and for the reputation of the university?

Beyond academic boycotts, an institution like UW-Madison can potentially confront a broad range of issues, including other forms of boycott, divestment concerns, etc. Addressing this broader range of issues is beyond the scope of our committee, but we hope that those matters too will receive due consideration, and that the notions in this report might serve as a foundation for that work.

Respectfully submitted:

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