



University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign Chapter
Academic Freedom
for a Free Society
Summer 2026 Newsletter

Strengthening the Connections That Sustain Us

Since our last annual newsletter, the challenges facing higher education have not relented—and neither has our resolve to meet and overcome them. Our chapter has persisted in strengthening relationships with allied organizations, building on and extending connections that enable us to anticipate and respond to threats more nimbly and powerfully.

The pressures are real and varied. Proposals to condition federal grants on political viewpoint, investigations that pressure institutions into settlements, funding cuts and grant terminations, visa barriers for international students and scholars, and efforts to control curricula and accreditation all continue to test the independence of our universities. Public sentiment remains a concern as well: although confidence in higher education ticked up modestly in 2025—to 42%, the first increase Gallup has recorded in a decade—it remains far below the 57% measured in 2015, while the share of Americans who consider a college education “very important” has continued to fall, reaching a new low of about 35%, down from 53% as recently as 2019.

At a time of strained public trust and mounting threats to democracy, it has never been more important to foster solidarity among institutions of higher learning, the plural methods of knowledge production they sustain, and the communities they serve—especially at a land-grant public university like ours.

Through membership in the AAUP, you help to shape local and national initiatives that protect academic freedoms and strengthen our collective voice. We are always greater than the sum of our parts, because we can draw on such breadth and depth of experience. So please: participate in our events, share your expertise, and help to ensure that higher education remains an engine of rigorous inquiry, generous learning, and civic engagement.

AAUP: Who We Are

The national [American Association of University Professors \(AAUP\)](#), founded in 1915, champions academic freedom, tenure, and shared governance to serve the public good. [Local chapters like ours](#), which was established in the 1920s, share these core values while maintaining autonomy to determine how best to serve individual campus communities. Your membership in the national AAUP fuels our ability to defend the values that define us, empowering us to shape our collective future while helping to protect academic freedom at other institutions across the country. As one of the nation’s largest universities, UIUC’s central location, size, public mission, diverse student body, and accessibility empower us to develop novel and consequential approaches to current challenges.

For the last century, our chapter has defended faculty against challenges to core academic values, offering resources for addressing concerns about tenure, the freedom to research and teach, and the rights of faculty and students across the campus. Below, we summarize our main activities over the past year and highlight the ways that the national AAUP complements our local efforts.

Monthly Policy Committee Meetings: Consider Joining Us!

Our chapter's Policy Committee convenes regular monthly meetings via Zoom, often with invited guests, to discuss emerging issues and develop proactive responses. We welcome participation from members and are actively seeking new representatives from different campus constituencies. Please let us know if you would like to attend a meeting and learn more about the work we do. This fall's meetings will be held Thursdays from 12:30 to 2:00 on September 10th, October 8th, November 5th, and December 3rd.

Meetings with Campus Administration

Our AAUP chapter maintains a longstanding tradition of regular meetings with top university administrators to advance our mission and ensure that faculty voices are heard. This fall, our entire Policy Committee met with Chancellor Charles Isbell (in his first term) and Provost John Coleman to discuss questions related to shared governance, academic freedom, current threats to higher education and their administrative responses, and constructive ideas for collaboration and joint effort.

Launching the Big Ten Chapter Alliance

In fall 2025, our chapter organized the Big Ten Chapter Alliance, bringing together key representatives of AAUP chapters across the Big Ten and beyond for regular Zoom meetings. This initiative has established lines of communication among peer institutions facing common pressures to enable the sharing of information and to formulate strategies for mutual support.

Continuation of the Illinois Informal Leadership Council

The Illinois Informal Leadership Council, initiated in spring 2025, has continued to maintain channels of communication and networks of support among allied campus constituencies. It brings together leaders from the Non-Tenure Faculty Coalition, Graduate Employees' Organization, Council of Academic Professionals, Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure, Illinois Student Government, Academic Senate, and University Statutes and Senate Procedures Committee. The Council constitutes a confidential, supplementary forum for collecting and discussing emerging concerns, without interfering with the independent activities of any member organization.

Supporting the Local "No Kings" Protest

Our chapter joined with other local organizations to sponsor **Champaign-Urbana's [No Kings Protest](#)** on March 28th. Intellectual freedom and inquiry are the conditions under which democracy educates itself and governs wisely. An informed public depends on universities—and in a time of democratic backsliding, the preservation of those freedoms, and of democracy itself, has rarely felt more urgent. We see this work as inseparable from our responsibility to the communities we serve.

Promotion and Tenure Panel

On April 22nd, our chapter continued its annual tradition of hosting a panel on *Achieving Promotion and Tenure: Policies and Procedures at UIUC*, via Zoom. Designed for faculty seeking promotion, as well as for their mentors and evaluators, the event drew a large audience. Its purpose is to demystify the promotion and tenure process, and attendees are invited to ask questions and express concerns with the option of doing so anonymously. Experts included William T. Bernhard (Executive Vice Provost for Academic Affairs), Curtis Perry (Professor of English and Chair of the Campus P&T Committee), Rosa Milagros Santos (Associate Provost for Faculty Development), and Carol Tilley (Associate Professor of Information Science and Chair of the Faculty Advisory Committee). The P&T panel recording is available for viewing [here](#).

Weaponizing Antidiscrimination: A Challenge to Academic Freedom

At this year's annual meeting on May 7th, our chapter hosted a presentation by our colleague **Kathryn (Kate) Clancy**, Professor of Anthropology, examining how antidiscrimination and civil rights frameworks—particularly Title VI—are increasingly being invoked in ways that threaten academic freedom. Drawing on her extensive research and advocacy on institutional culture, and with reference to recent events on our own campus, Clancy explored the tension between safeguarding civil rights and preserving the open inquiry that universities depend on. The event was moderated by chapter President Rob Kar and a recording is available [here](#).

Private Consultations with Faculty

Individual faculty members frequently turn to our chapter as a vital resource. Please know that we offer confidential consultation on concerns about tenure, academic freedom, relations with unit and campus administration, and emerging threats to higher education. If you have a need or concern, please contact President Carol Symes or Vice President Carol Tilley (see below). We're always here to support you.

National AAUP Activities

The national AAUP defends academic freedom and shared governance through litigation and advocacy against politically motivated funding restrictions, ideologically based actions targeting noncitizen students and faculty, and other escalating attacks from federal and state governments. The AAUP depends on faculty membership to sustain these efforts.

Our local advocacy is amplified through the national AAUP's ability to drive collective action that safeguards shared values without exposing specific individuals or institutions to targeted retaliation. This year, that national work took an especially constructive and forward-looking turn.

Most significantly, the AAUP—together with the American Federation of Teachers—launched [**Blueprint for Strengthening and Transforming Higher Education**](#), a comprehensive policy platform. Rather than responding only to immediate threats, the *Blueprint* articulates an affirmative vision for a future in which colleges and universities are recognized as constituting an indispensable public good essential to a functioning democracy—not coopted by and treated as corporate entities. Its central tenets call for restored and sustained public investment so that degrees are accessible and debt-free; strengthened safeguards for academic freedom that shield researchers and faculty from political interference; genuine shared governance in which faculty

and staff make final decisions on curricula and research priorities; and labor reforms that end the reliance on low-wage contingent faculty. The platform reflects the same conviction animating our local work this year: that higher education is best defended not only by resisting political capture, but also by recentring student learning and reaffirming the public mission at the heart of our institutions.

New Members Always Welcome

We thank current members for their steadfast support and encourage sharing this newsletter with colleagues curious about the AAUP. In the current climate, we have seen a sharp increase in membership and are grateful for the participation of a broad coalition of scholars across campus. Our chapter, which represents tenure-stream faculty, is closely allied with specialized faculty through the Non-Tenure Faculty Coalition (NTFC-[Local #6546](#)), which is also affiliated with the national AAUP. To join, go to the national [AAUP website](#) and click “Join Now.” Please note that members can use research funds to cover membership dues, since the AAUP is a professional organization.

We’d Love to Talk with More of You!

This year, we engaged with colleagues through the annual new faculty orientation, our workshops, listservs, and department visits. In the coming year, we aim to expand our membership across UIUC’s fourteen colleges and schools to address the growing and specialized threats we all face. Has your department met with us? Invite us to introduce the AAUP’s mission and resources. Contact your department leadership or reach out to us directly (see below).

Current Chapter Leadership

Consistent with our chapter’s tradition of rotating leadership, Rob Kar stepped down as President on August 1st, 2026. Carol Symes, who has served as Vice President, was elected in May to take the helm as President and Carol Tilley, longtime Policy Committee member, was elected as Vice President. We also thank Rick Laugesen and Bill Williamson, who were re-elected to serve as co-treasurers and co-secretaries. We are grateful to all past and present officers for their service.

How to Reach Us

Please join us in advocating for academic freedom, tenure, and shared governance. To learn more about membership or our chapter and activities, please contact chapter President **Carol Symes** (History) at symes@illinois.edu (carol.symes@gmail.com) or Vice President **Carol Tilley** (School of Information Sciences) at ctilley.illinois.edu (carol.l.tilley@gmail.com). Visit our [chapter website](#) for local events and updates, and the [national website](#) for national AAUP resources and to join the AAUP. You can also follow us on Bluesky (<https://bsky.app/profile/aaup-uiuc.bsky.social>).

