



## University of Houston Chapter

February 23, 2026

**To: Faculty Council**

**From: UH AAUP Chapter (166 UH faculty)**

Dear Colleagues,

In the coming weeks, decisions by UH leadership and Faculty Council will shape whether faculty can teach without significant constraints on our academic freedom. Already the political climate has produced unprecedented pressure on faculty to self-censor, and we have received credible reports of administrator led or coerced censorship on campus. Faculty Council should carefully consider whether it wishes to endorse "guidelines" that constrict academic freedom today and are likely to metastasize into new and more intrusive restrictions in the years to come, when trusted senior administrators step down from their posts.

The course review checklist currently under consideration by the Faculty Council Curriculum Committee would require faculty to conduct and certify a self-assessment of each course every semester. As we understand it, faculty who do not complete the self-assessment may have their courses subject to administrative review, despite AAUP standards—which guide implementation of UH academic Policy—that prohibit administrator control over course content.

The UH AAUP Chapter vigorously opposes the anti-"indoctrination" course review as well as the checklist and ancillary verbiage implementing that review—in their entirety. We oppose these actions because they are unnecessary and threaten the Freedom to Teach and the Freedom to Learn—they also obviously violate UH's actual academic freedom policy. "Suggestions" today become *de facto* or *de jure* policies in short order. We urge the council and administration to think of the compounding, long-term effects of embarking down this course and urge both to hold the line now.

UH policy, which is guided by AAUP standards, *already prohibits* indoctrination, a practice where an instructor "dogmatically insist[s] on the truth of propositions" while denying students the opportunity to contest them. This reality renders the course review entirely redundant and inapt, since it targets *content* rather than this narrow, prohibited form of pedagogical malpractice. The checklist is designed this way because there is political pressure to censor us. "Indoctrination" is a canard.

Faculty Council has the power to vote to say **no**, and to say clearly to administration that the faculty reject these actions *in their entirety*. If administration wishes to proceed, it will not be with the faculty's blessing. We hope faculty council has the courage to serve this vital role at a pivotal moment for the Freedom to Teach in Texas.

We are particularly concerned that the proposed approach to combatting the non-existent problem of "indoctrination":

- Replaces academic freedom with the politicized and vague “academic integrity” standard, narrowing the freedom to teach guaranteed in UH bylaws and incorporated AAUP policies;
- reinforces a narrative of widespread classroom indoctrination that is not supported by credible evidence, either nationally or at UH;
- encourages risk-avoidant teaching and self-censorship;
- undermines student learning and professional preparation;
- expands faculty exposure to complaints and disciplinary review;
- pushes teaching toward a model of performative “neutrality” rather than discipline-based professional judgment; and
- further shifts core curricular decisions away from shared faculty governance toward administrative oversight in a politically charged environment.

Our concerns are not hypothetical. AAUP has received reports that, in at least one UH [college](#), a dean has already implemented a course review process “to ensure alignment with SB 37” and “academic integrity” and has directed faculty to remove or modify syllabi content on race, LGBTQ+, and other issues that might be viewed as objectionable or potentially uncomfortable to students. Whether or not such actions were done in anticipation of the proposed framework, they illustrate the real-world pressures that broad and ambiguous review standards can generate.

Neither SB 37 nor existing UH policy requires the type of faculty attestation contemplated by the administration’s proposed framework. Earlier versions of SB 37 included more prescriptive language regarding ideological content in courses, but the Legislature ultimately *did not adopt those provisions* in the bill’s [final version](#). Moreover, [UH Board of Regents Policy 21.03.2](#) already affirms faculty freedom in the classroom consistent with long-standing [AAUP principles](#) that recognize “the right of faculty members to select the materials, determine the approach to the subject, make the assignments, and assess student academic performance in teaching activities for which they are individually responsible, without having their decisions subject to the veto of a department chair, dean, or other administrative officer.”

We urge faculty council to reject the self-censorship checklist and press administration to come up with a solution that does not eviscerate the University’s core academic mission.

We trust the views of one-hundred and sixty-six of your colleagues will be given due consideration.

Below you will find a detailed critique of the guidelines.

**A. The draft self-attestation framework risks mischaracterizing central features of a rigorous education as “indoctrination”**

Professional standards draw a careful distinction between education and indoctrination. Under AAUP guidance, indoctrination occurs when an instructor dogmatically insists that students

accept professionally contestable propositions as unquestioned truth while preventing meaningful challenge.

By contrast, it is *not* indoctrination for faculty to:

- teach knowledge widely accepted within a discipline;
- assign controversial materials for critical examination;
- structure courses around particular scholarly frameworks, such as environmental justice, neoclassical economics, the immigrant experience, African American history, or feminist theory;
- share reasoned academic interpretations while remaining open to critique; or
- require students, as part of a structured academic exercise, to assume a particular role or defend a particular position without requiring the student to adopt that position as a personal belief.

Higher education depends on precisely this kind of robust intellectual engagement. The assignment of challenging—even unsettling—material is often essential to developing students’ analytical independence. Mimicking the prescriptive language that was ultimately removed from SB 37, the draft faculty attestation document directs faculty to examine course materials to ensure they do not require students to “adopt, affirm, or comply with specific political, ideological, or belief-based viewpoints,” and the attestation checklist repeats this formulation (“Materials do not require students to adopt or affirm political, ideological, or belief-based viewpoints”).

While AAUP has supported, and will continue to support, the goal of avoiding true indoctrination, this formulation risks blurring the distinctions described above. In practice, reviewers (especially non-specialists relying on syllabi alone) may equate framework-based teaching, normative analysis, or the use of challenging materials with requiring belief adoption. Standards meant to prohibit dogmatism can therefore in practice promote self-censorship by pressuring faculty to avoid legitimate intellectual frameworks or to steer away from contested subjects.

**B. The draft document operationalizes “balance” as a checklist expectation rather than a disciplinary judgment**

Standards of academic freedom recognize that judgments about intellectual balance are inherently discipline-specific and depend on substantive expertise. What perspectives are essential, credible, and pedagogically appropriate varies by field and by a course’s learning objectives.

However, several items in the draft self-attestation document invite or require faculty to demonstrate that they have supplied “contrasting or varied perspectives” and “dissenting views,” ensured “multiple perspectives are considered,” and “where feasible” included “credible counter-frames or dissenting views.” The checklist further asks faculty to confirm that “including or

excluding alternative or dissenting views reflects professional judgment,” and encourages seeking feedback when unsure whether materials reflect a “sufficient range of viewpoints.”

Balance makes sense only when anchored in disciplinary standards and substantive expertise. Not every topic presents symmetrical scholarly disagreement, and not every course benefits from presenting all conceivable viewpoints. Faculty are trained precisely to evaluate the quality, relevance, and evidentiary support of competing claims.

For example, professional standards would not require a biology instructor to give equal scientific weight to creationism alongside evolutionary theory, nor would public health instruction treat discredited medical claims as coequal with well-established evidence-based practices. Similarly, in many humanities and social science fields, courses are appropriately designed to help students master well-supported scholarly interpretations before engaging in marginal or highly contested claims.

A generic expectation of “counter-frames” risks two predictable distortions:

1. *false equivalence*: pressure to treat marginal or discredited claims as though they merit instructional parity; and
2. *curricular dilution*: pressure to add “the other side” even where the course is appropriately designed to build foundational competence in well-supported bodies of knowledge.

The appropriate question is not whether every conceivable perspective is represented, but whether course content reflects the intellectual standards of the field. Although the draft document occasionally gestures toward disciplinary judgment, its checklist structure risks transforming context-sensitive academic determinations into an auditable box to check—precisely the kind of abstract neutrality framework that traditional understandings of academic freedom caution against.

### **C. The draft adopts “hostile learning environment” logic in ways that can chill ordinary pedagogy**

The draft faculty attestation document instructs that for “sensitive or contested topics,” participation should allow “intellectual multiplicity” and should not “compel the disclosure of personal beliefs unnecessarily.” The checklist further states that—when aligned with learning objectives—participation in activities involving sensitive or contested topics should be “voluntary” and that “requiring students to disclose personal beliefs is avoided.”

Professional standards rightly prohibit harassment and ridicule. They do not, however, treat intellectual challenge as hostility. Higher education necessarily involves asking students to articulate, examine, question, and sometimes reconsider deeply held assumptions, including

their own beliefs. Discomfort in the face of challenging material is often part of serious intellectual work.

The draft's phrasing risks being read as discouraging common and pedagogically supported practices such as:

- structured reflection on ethical commitments or professional identity,
- role-taking exercises designed to strengthen empathy and argumentation, or
- guided discussion prompts that help students examine how beliefs shape reasoning.

In many disciplines—social work, medicine, law, education, and public health—structured engagement with sensitive topics is central to professional formation.

Treating such engagement as presumptively optional, or signaling that belief-related reflection should generally be avoided, risks a form of curriculum hollowing that ultimately harms students. In some programs, widespread movement in this direction could also create tension with accreditation expectations that require demonstrated competence in ethical reasoning, professional judgment, and work with diverse populations. The cumulative effect is not simply a concern about faculty autonomy, but that risk-avoidant course design will deprive students of the rigorous analytical and professional preparation that many programs are specifically charged to provide.

#### **D. Relevance Requires Disciplinary Judgment**

Course descriptions are necessarily general and cannot anticipate every intellectually productive connection an instructor may draw. Faculty routinely use contemporary examples, comparative cases, and interdisciplinary materials to deepen student understanding. Determining what is pedagogically relevant is a core function of disciplinary expertise, not a mechanical exercise. Yet the proposed self-attestation document repeatedly emphasizes that faculty should consider how materials might be read by reviewers outside the classroom context. When course design is shaped by external optics—especially in a climate of heightened political scrutiny—the result is not neutral “quality control.” Rather, it creates incentives for risk-avoidant course design that omits precisely the kinds of challenging connections that higher education should foster.

#### **E. The draft constrains teaching style by implicitly privileging “studied agnosticism”**

Long-standing academic freedom principles recognize that teaching pedagogy is itself an area of protected professional judgment. Faculty may appropriately adopt a range of instructional approaches depending on the discipline, subject matter, and learning objectives.

The draft, however, repeatedly frames best practice as ensuring ideological neutrality, avoiding “advocacy,” presenting “multiple perspectives,” and avoiding activities that could be construed as eliciting beliefs. Standing alone, each item may seem unobjectionable; taken together, they

can be read to favor a narrow model of instruction: the professor as a neutral curator who avoids taking or testing scholarly positions.

In practice, many faculty teach most effectively by advancing reasoned interpretations, modeling analytical argument, and inviting students to evaluate the professor's stated claims. The relevant professional boundary is not whether a faculty member has expressed a particular scholarly view; it is whether students are graded on agreement with that view or denied space to question or contest it. By structuring the review checklist around signals of neutrality and avoidance, the draft risks shifting teaching practices away from this established professional standard and toward a form of performative neutrality. Such signals may discourage pedagogical approaches that are widely accepted, educationally effective, and central to disciplinary training in many fields.

**F. The draft's documentation requirements create a compliance record that expands professional risk**

The draft directs faculty to "document professional judgment," be "prepared to explain" content and pedagogical choices, and ensure that the "rationale for content selection and pedagogical choices" is "clearly articulated and justified." The self-evaluation reflection further suggests that "No" or "Partially" responses "should be reviewed" and may require consultation or revision.

This is not merely reflective practice: it is the creation of a paper trail that can be invoked in complaint processes, grading disputes, or administrative review—especially if UH couples the checklist with an attestation requirement.

Importantly, this record would be keyed to criteria that (as discussed above) can be interpreted more broadly than what existing state law and UH policy require. Once incorporated into a formal attestation process, these additional criteria could function as de facto performance standards in the review of complaints or disputes *even though they do not appear in the governing statute or Board of Regents policy*. Over time, such mechanisms can shift the baseline for acceptable teaching without any formal change to governing policy.

The linkage to SB 37 warrants particular attention. The draft repeatedly closely tracks language that appeared in earlier versions of SB 37 but was not included in the statute as enacted. Whatever one's views of those earlier proposals, the Legislature ultimately did not require that form of ideological compliance review as part of general education oversight. The appearance of similar language in the draft faculty self-attestation document raises questions as to whether the proposed framework exceeds what state law presently requires at the expense of student learning and faculty's academic freedom. The predictable effect is risk-avoidant teaching and heightened professional exposure, especially among contingent and early-career faculty who have fewer employment protections.

**G. The draft document further erodes faculty governance and professional autonomy**

SB 37 has already altered the landscape of faculty participation in university governance across Texas. In that context, the introduction of additional layers of centralized course review should be understood not as an isolated quality-control measure, but as part of a broader shift away from faculty-driven academic decision-making.

Academic freedom in the United States has long rested on the principle that disciplinary experts working through shared governance processes are best positioned to make judgments about curriculum and pedagogy. When responsibility for these judgments increasingly migrates to administrative oversight processes, the locus of academic authority similarly shifts upward. By coupling faculty self-certification based on broadly framed criteria with the possibility of administrative review, the proposed approach endorses a more supervisory model of academic oversight—one led by administrators who face significant external pressures in the current political environment. Moreover, experience suggests that once supervisory review structures of this kind become embedded in higher education, they tend to expand in scope and intensity over time, raising legitimate concerns about longer-term pressures toward content-based oversight of the curriculum.

Thank you for your careful consideration,

The UH AAUP Chapter (166 UH faculty)