Committee on the Defense of the Professional Rights of Philosophers

2021–2022 Membership

Leslie Francis, chair (2023)
Amy Olberding (2022)
Wendy Salkin (2022)
Christina M. Bellon (2023)
Alison M. Jaggar (2023)
Tziporah Kasachkoff (2024)
John A. Keller (2024)

Michelle Kosch, Eastern Division Representative, ex officio (2022)
Michael Burroughs, Pacific Division Representative, ex officio (2023)
Rachel Zuckert, Central Division Representative, ex officio (2024)
To: APA Board of Officers
From: Leslie Francis
Re: Report of Chair of Committee for the Defense of Professional Rights of Philosophers

Oct. 1, 2022

The Committee has had no new business this year, and so has nothing to report other than the ongoing need to reconsider the Committee’s name and mission.

I have begun this discussion with Melissa Zinkin, committee vice chair for 2022-2023. We plan to schedule a meeting with the member of this year’s committee in order to consider two recommendations: (1) changing the committee’s name to the “Committee on Academic Rights of Philosophers” and (2) clarifying that the committee’s mission is to respond to complaints of violations of rights as specified in APA policies and to educate members of the profession and the public about best practices with regard to professional rights and interests. Depending on the responses of the committee, our hope is to present these or other recommendations about the committee to the February meeting of the Board of Officers.

What follows are my own concerns about the committee as currently structured. The CDPRP as currently constituted is poorly named and ill-defined. It should not be viewed as defending professional rights. Instead, it should be viewed as protecting and furthering the academic rights and interests of philosophers as defined in APA policy.

Why not defending? It’s both too strong and too weak. It’s too strong because we can’t really defend; we have no investigatory resources or enforcement authority. The idea of “defending” seems to come from an era when academic freedom was under siege and organizations like the ACLU or the AAUP, both of which have more and quite different resources. It’s too weak because it sounds like it’s focused on rear-guard actions against attacks. Instead, I think we need to protect and promote, through discussion, consultation, and at times sending opinion letters to individuals or departments that have impeded the academic rights of philosophers. We’re in a world in which academic freedom is threatened once again—think “don’t say gay” and anti-“woke”—but in which civil liberties litigation is only one and not likely the most effective tool. We should have outreach functions like roundtables at meetings devoted to questions like the challenges of teaching philosophy in states with these laws, or social media and academic freedom.

Why not professional? It’s unclear what falls within the scope of “professional” rights. During the last few years, the only complaints we have received concerned contract disputes, primarily people not being paid what they think they were owed and primarily from people who are not tenure-line. I think instead our focus should be on official APA policy that is rights related. While I’m not certain of the appropriate term, these policies are all related in some way to academic rights. These policies include:

- Policies on Complaints and Sanctions
- Policy on Revoking Prizes and Awards
- Privacy Policy
- Professional Conduct Policy for APA Meetings
There are also many APA statements of relevance, which I think the CDPRP could promote, discuss, and help with education of the profession. Some of these allow appeals to the APA, such as the statement on hotel room interviews. Others only require disclosures, such as the statement on the job market calendar. Some statements are “shoulds”—a use of language that in professional code drafting indicates that they are aspirational goals rather than requirements that could subject someone to discipline. An example is the statement on bullying and harassment; the statement covers both conduct that might indeed cross the line into disciplinable, such as stalking, as well as the more overarching “other hostile conduct that diminishes the capacity of its target to function effectively as a teacher, worker, or scholar.” The role of these statements is admirable and the CDPRP could help to promote them rather than serving primarily as a complaint mechanism.

One of the most difficult areas worthy of note is the statement on non-tenure track faculty. The statement provides that institutions “should minimize reliance” on such faculty and “should have policies that provide for their long-term stability.” These provisions are often not honored and have indeed been the subject of several complaints to the CDPRP. But the statement is aspirational; there’s really nothing official the committee can do in such cases. On the other hand, we could help the APA in learning about the landscape of the use of non-tenure line faculty, along the lines of the recent report about whether philosophy departments are independent. Reports such as these take resources, however, that the CDPRP does not have.

We also have the challenge that the APA now has additional committees devoted to some of the questions that years ago came to the CDPRP. The Policies Regarding Complaints and Sanctions states that professional rights complaints come to the CDPRP and complaints about discrimination and harassment go to the ombuds. There are other committees that have interests related to academic rights, too—especially the committee on Inclusiveness in the Profession and the committees charged with reporting on the status of Asian and Asian American Philosophers & Philosophies, Hispanics/Latinxs, LGBTQ People in the Profession, Native American and Indigenous Philosophers, Status of Black Philosophers, Status of Disabled People in the Profession, and Status of Women. These committees all have a wealth of relevant expertise and commitment, but complaints about issues relevant to them are referred to the CDPRP. I think there should be some consideration of how these committees could and should interrelate with the CDPRP as it pursues furthering the academic rights of philosophers.