

Session Overview

Session Title: “KU’s Governance Structures and Academic Freedom Policies”

Date & Time: Wednesday, April 1, 2026

Location / Format: Hall Center for the Humanities, In-Person

Session Type: Panel Discussion

Moderator / Discussion Leader: Nicole Hodges Persley, Ph.D. Co-PI for the Sawyer Seminar Series, Vice Provost of Community Impact, and Professor of American Studies and African and African American Studies.

Presenter Information

Name(s), Affiliation(s), & Area(s) of Expertise:

- Samuel Brody, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in Religious Studies, and former member of Faculty Senate at KU, where he focused on promotion and tenure and protection from unjust firing.
- Emily Casey, Ph.D., Hall Assistant Professor of American Art and Culture and United Academics of KU (UAKU) contract bargainer for the recent contract, particularly articles pertaining to academic freedom, personal expression, a grievance process for violations to the contract, and codifying governing structures.
- Mike Leitch, J.D., Deputy General Counsel for the Lawrence Campus, speaking from his personal lived experience as a lawyer and parent of KU student, not on behalf of KU.
- Lauren Jones McKown, J.D., Associate Vice Chancellor for Civil Rights & Title IX and Title IX Coordinator, overseeing Title IX claims and Clery Act compliance, processes heavily dictated and regimented by federal law and limited-degree case law.
- Natalie Holick, J.D., Chief Compliance Officer and Title IX Coordinator for the KU Medical Center.

Stated Framing or Guiding Questions:

- What are the ways that academic freedom is promoted on KU’s campus?
- How is academic freedom endangered?
- How do KU’s governance structures work to foster democratic values and model democratic processes?

Audience Composition

- Faculty: 18
- Undergraduate Students: 2
- Graduate Students: 5
- Staff: 14
- KU Community Members: 13
- Non-KU Community Members: 5
- Cohort Participants: 20

Pre-Session Audience Sentiment (if collected)

- Key expectations or questions: N/A
- Notable concerns or tensions: Emails post-seminar advocated for more staff representation and reporting in the seminar discussion. Staff members also asked for

invitations to participate as session leaders or moderators. The Sawyer Seminar team has extended an invitation for representatives from the Staff Senate to satisfy this ask.

- Themes emerging prior to discussion: discerning legitimate criticisms of higher education from “illegitimate” one; the public’s understanding of academic freedom; distinguishing academic freedom from freedom of speech; the corporatization of higher education; harms and protections afforded by institutional neutrality.

Core Content Summary

- Key arguments or perspectives presented:
 - o UAKU protects the academic freedom of all KU faculty and staff in a fraught socio-political moment, when teaching and researching particular subjects may expose them to broader political threats. Explicit language of the recent (Spring 2026) contract articulates a grievance process that provides assurances for those who feel that their academic freedom rights are being infringed upon. Coalition between lecturers and tenured faculty challenges the hierarchy of the higher education environment and allows lecturers to grow as scholars.
 - o The general public in the United States does not understand what academic freedom is or the threat presented by higher education institutions acting as corporations. There are many academic stakeholders who are neither faculty nor staff, such as students, parents, and legislators, etc. There is a need to be intentional about how academic freedom is promoted and explained to non-academics, given the lack of consensus about what is considered credible information, news, and free speech.
 - o Academics must “do politics” to help the general public understand that the classroom is a place for exploring ideas, not teaching one’s own; that expression of one’s personal views online or in public is not a teaching agenda. Professors across the US are being fired due to this misconception.
 - o The Office of Audit, Risk & Compliance receives many reports about professors’ social media posts, and the office regularly protects academic staff and faculty in these cases.
 - o The Kansas Board of Regents (KBOR), state law, and federal law can supersede even the union contract. The role of legislation cannot be overstated.
 - o Decisions like the implementation of the Core 34 requirements for undergraduates at KS colleges and universities showed the power of KBOR: they seized the right to create curriculum from academic staff and faculty, who are education specialists.
 - o A shared common goal between the union and administration’s representatives for greater communication and proactive planning to better guide responses coming from the state and KBOR. This was evidenced in the common shared values among both groups.
- Major themes discussed: Relationship between KU governance structures and academic freedom; UAKU contract contents and bargaining, as they pertain to academic freedom; relationship between the Kansas Board of Regents and academic freedom at KU; the university’s function as a corporation.
- Points of alignment across perspectives:

- o When higher education institutions function as corporations, there is a higher risk to academic freedom due to conflicts with considerations for the university's bottom line.
 - o Academics must develop literacy strategies to work together and to reach the general public.
- Points of tension or divergence:
 - o There were very little points of disagreement expressed. The challenges surfaced had more to do with the political environment in the state, and between the enduring tensions that persist between faculty/staff and the central administration.

Dialogue & Engagement Highlights

- Notable audience questions and comments:
 - o How can we respect and protect professors' personhood at a time when parents and students are reporting professors for their views and self-expression on their personal social media accounts?
 - o Compared to the academic environment in China, there is far more academic freedom in the United States: in China, university research must always be in compliance with the state. US academics must push back against encroaching state control on research topics and teaching subjects if we want to maintain that freedom.
 - o KU's governance has given limited, if any, guidance about matters that threaten the safety of students, faculty, and staff, such as the closure of student housing, attacks on protest encampments, ICE on campus, and gender-neutral bathroom access. Lack of clear communication promotes a culture of fear, erodes the rights of staff and faculty, and breaks down the efficacy of university governance. Students are suffering due to KU's lack of communication and apparent disregard about these matters; they display visible distress in classrooms.
- Moments of productive disagreement: N/A
- Examples of cross-perspective dialogue:
- There was a shared interest in creating better avenues for the sharing of perspectives between faculty/staff and the administration. The passage of the new union contract was seen as an important milestone for achieving this.
- Facilitator strategies that supported balanced exchange: Nicole created a series of open-ended questions that encouraged panelists to consider the current state of governance structures at KU, including successes and areas for improvement. In her comments, she reinforced common themes that emerged between panelist responses as well as the audience members. After the moderated panel, Nicole encouraged the audience to move around the room and discuss freely with other attendees. This format ensured that those who may not feel comfortable presenting their comments or questions to the entire room were still able to voice their thoughts.

Post-Session Audience Response

- Shifts in perspective (if observable): N/A
- Lingering questions:
 - o How to sustain the dialogue between faculty/staff and the administration on matters pertaining to academic freedom?

- Feedback themes (positive/constructive):
 - Reorient the conversation to meaningfully include staff's stake in academic freedom
 - Take measures to increase accessibility for undergraduate students and others who may not understand university structure and administrative roles
 - Consider measures to advertise to the wider Lawrence (non-academic) community
- Indicators of increased understanding across differences: N/A

Outcomes & Takeaways

- Key insights generated:
 - Some faculty and staff are worried by the general public's current understanding of academic freedom and freedom of speech; social media and having a public presence presents a unique conundrum for content experts.
 - KU does offer protections to academic faculty and staff, notably in the case of public social media posts, but some continue to feel unsupported by the University due to lack of communication and perceived threats against those who take strong stances.
 - UAKU's contract uses precise language to protect the academic freedom of KU faculty and staff, whether they are dues-paying members or not.
 - Some faculty and staff view the corporatization of higher education as a dire threat to both university workers' academic freedom privileges and status as employees.
 - Areas identified for further exploration: the role of the Kansas Board of Regents; efforts to expand academic freedom literacy.
- Contributions to broader seminar goals: identifying perceived threats to academic freedom; gaps in conversations about academic freedom; new discussion format (smaller breakout groups) enabled more engagement between members of the cohort and with non-cohort attendees.

Action Steps

- Follow-up conversations needed: the diversity of the stakeholders in academic freedom debates/considerations.
- Suggested future speakers/topics: N/A.
- Materials to archive/distribute: Session Slideshow, "Higher Ed is Trapped in Trump's Chaos" from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Academic Freedom and Responsibility" excerpt from the complete tentative UAKU agreements (2025).
- Opportunities for publication or public scholarship:
 - Hall Center for the Humanities, Call for Proposals "Interdisciplinary Research Seminars" due April 24, 2026 (deadline has passed).
 - The Hall Center invites proposals from faculty members in the humanities and humanistic social sciences who wish to organize an ongoing faculty seminar around a specific, interdisciplinary theme. The Hall Center Seminars provide a setting for interdisciplinary scholarly exchange about topics of interest to humanities scholars at KU.

- Faculty members may propose a seminar lasting either one (1) year or three (3) years. One-year seminars are intended solely for the purpose of exploring topics that are more focused and especially timely.
- Support for seminars includes: a seminar budget of up to \$1,000 per year to provide for expenses associated with visiting speakers; meeting space in the Hall Center; and assistance with publicity and seminar administration provided by the Hall Center's Seminar Coordinator. Applications should be mailed to hchseminars@ku.edu.