

Since the phrase “academic freedom” first appeared in a reported American court decision almost sixty years ago, courts have treated academic freedom without definitional clarity. This article traces the arc of more than half a century of academic freedom jurisprudence in the United States. It argues that courts have proven unwilling or unable to ascribe to the concept a unitary, coherent, or (above all) useful meaning. Reported decisions are coy about the constitutional underpinnings of academic freedom, stubbornly unclear about the meaning of the term, and unpredictable in the application of academic freedom to facts in particular cases.