

Jeffrey J. Williams, English, Carnegie Mellon University

Candidate Biography

Jeffrey J. Williams was born in 1958 and grew up on Long Island. He first attended Columbia University on scholarships, but had to leave school to work. He eventually finished at SUNY-Stony Brook (BA, 1984; PhD, 1990), where he was involved in the graduate student strike of 1986, a decade before the more famed one at Yale.

Like many in his academic cohort, his job search was not guaranteed. After finishing his graduate assistantship in 1989, he spent a year working in landscaping and publishing, although he did manage to land an assistant professorship at East Carolina University in Greenville, NC in 1990. From there he moved to the University of Missouri in Columbia in 1998, and to Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh in 2004, so he has worked in a variety of universities. He is currently Professor of English and of Literary and Cultural Studies at Carnegie Mellon.

Much of his writing has focused on the state of higher education, academic labor, and student debt. (See, for instance, “Brave New University,” College English 1999; “The Post-Welfare State University,” ALH 2006; “Debt Education,” Dissent 2006; and “Student Debt and the Spirit of Indenture,” Dissent 2008.) He also has written about intellectuals, the history of contemporary criticism, and the novel, and he publishes regularly in venues such as the Chronicle of Higher Education as well as academic places.

A good part of his work over the past two decades has also been editing the critical journal, the minnesota review. He has

sponsored a great deal of work on academic labor, including a special issue on “Activism and the Academy”; interviews in recent issues with Marc Bousquet and with Andrew Ross; and essays on graduate student and adjunct labor and on the reconfiguration of administration (see www.theminnesotareview.org).

Candidate Statement

I have been enthused by the new direction of AAUP and hope to contribute to its momentum. I believe that the AAUP presents one of the best institutional bodies not only to protect academic freedom but to counter the trend toward privatization and administratification, if I can coin a deliberately ugly word, that has pared back academic freedom. I am particularly concerned with the different constituencies that the AAUP represents, from tenure-stream faculty to part-time and casual faculty. I am also interested in reaching out to graduate students.

I have been active in unionization movements from my days as a graduate student at Stony Brook (we went on strike in 1986 and won union recognition and some gains) and as a professor at East Carolina University in Committees of Correspondence (we worked with housekeepers). I have also been active in speaking against the glut of student debt, which jeopardizes another dimension of academic freedom, constraining students in their work in the university (I recently participated in the Young Democratic Socialists Convention in New York in a forum on debt).

Probably my most important work for academic freedom has been editing the minnesota review, a literary and cultural studies journal, for the past eighteen years. I

have encouraged a great deal of work on academic labor, the corporatization of the university, and activism, running many reports, articles, and other material. I have especially tried to give a forum to graduate student labor and unionization efforts. I have also featured a good deal of work by critics of higher education, publishing, among others, Michael Bérubé, Marc Bousquet, Cary Nelson, Adolph Reed, and Andrew Ross.

In my own research and writing, I have focused on the state of higher education, analyzing what I call “the post-welfare state university” and criticizing in particular student debt. Given the squeeze on faculty and the urgency of problems besetting higher education, I would welcome the opportunity to work on the Council of AAUP.