

# Princeton Principles for a Campus Culture of Free Inquiry

## I. Introduction

- The core mission of the university, and its distinctive contribution to the American republic, is the pursuit of truth and advancement of knowledge through scholarship and teaching. This mission is sustained by freedom of inquiry, freedom of expression, and equality before laws and campus regulations. The best universities cultivate free and thoughtful minds.
- Universities are respected and supported by the public because the public trusts that they will advance free inquiry, honor intellectual merit, and respect the diverse ideas that arise naturally from the pursuit of truth.
- Many of our nation's colleges and universities are failing to maintain cultures of free and vigorous inquiry. Faculty and university leaders of these institutions should soberly evaluate and revitalize their institutional cultures. In cases where trustees or other non-faculty members engage in reform efforts, they must intervene in good faith by supporting a university's efforts to fulfill its core mission. Universities should not be made into political or ideological battlegrounds.

The Chicago Principles of Free Expression (2014) argued that universities should remain committed to “free, robust, and uninhibited debate and deliberation.” The Princeton Principles for a Campus Culture of Free Inquiry affirm this view while extending its scope. They argue that universities have a *special fiduciary duty* to foster freedom of thought for the benefit of the societies that sustain them.

The following principles 1) articulate the core mission of the university in relation to its special status as an educational institution dedicated to free inquiry; 2) provide standards that cultivate free and vigorous inquiry in scholarship, teaching, and campus activities beyond the classroom; and 3) offer broad guidelines for the revitalization of the university's core mission.

## II. Universities and the Republic

The American university is a historic achievement for many reasons, not least of which is that it provides a haven for free inquiry and the pursuit of truth. Its unique culture has made it a world leader in advancing the frontiers of practical and theoretical knowledge. The habits of mind required for this advancement of knowledge sustain our republic by educating citizens in the liberality and intellectual independence necessary to participate in self-government in a pluralistic society.

To do their work well, universities need a protected sphere of operation in which free speech and academic freedom flourish. Scholarship and teaching cannot achieve their full potential when

constrained—externally or internally—by political, ideological, or economic agendas that impede or displace the disinterested process of pursuing truth and advancing knowledge.

The pivotal 1915 *Declaration of Academic Freedom and Tenure*, written by the newly created American Association of University Professors, held that nonsectarian (“non-proprietary”) universities bear a special obligation in a free society to cultivate critical thinking through institutional independence and freedom of mind. Trustees of both public and private nonsectarian institutions have a responsibility to maintain “non-partisan institution[s] of learning.” They must pledge not to restrict the intellectual freedom of faculty and students, and trust faculty to make the decisions that will maintain a culture of free thought and academic achievement.

As the Declaration also makes clear, faculty empowerment makes faculty members responsible for maintaining a climate of intellectual freedom, ensuring scholarly integrity, and promoting excellence in the pursuit of truth. Shirking these responsibilities invites non-faculty entities to assume them.

The work of cultivating an academic culture where free inquiry blooms has become more difficult in recent decades. The competing agendas of the contemporary “multiversity” often eclipse the core mission. Speech codes and related policies detrimental to free inquiry have proliferated. Some members of the university community argue that robust freedom of inquiry permits speech that can “harm” students’ well-being or hinder institutional efforts to attain particular conceptions of social justice or “diversity, equity, and inclusion.” In response, trustees, regents, alumni, and state legislators have become more active in university affairs, sometimes pressing for changes that stifle free inquiry despite proposing them for the sake of promoting it. In sum, the prevailing model of university self-governance is being challenged in serious ways from many sides.

Careful guidance and reform are necessary to preserve conditions that foster intellectual freedom, and that protect scholarship, teaching and expression in the university. Ideally, protection of free and open inquiry will be renewed by faculty on campus.

Administrations and all other campus units touching on research, pedagogy, free speech, and academic freedom should clearly *prioritize* a culture of free and vigorous inquiry. Academic leaders have the privilege of explaining to all—students, regents, trustees, philanthropists, accreditation agencies, and the public—that a culture of free inquiry is essential to any education that aims to form free citizens and promote the growth of students.

### **III. Standards for Fostering a Campus Culture of Free Inquiry**

#### *IIIa. Scholarship*

Free inquiry in scholarship is the liberty of scholars and students to pursue truth, advance knowledge, and encourage artistic excellence wherever the quest may lead. It is bounded only by law and by scholarly or artistic judgment and discernment. There is a corresponding duty for faculty to judge intellectual and creative work by its substantive merits alone, and not by

accidental externalities such as race, sex, personal characteristics, political affiliation, ideological commitments, or religion.

All questions are welcome starting points for scholarly inquiry, no matter how controversial or offensive they might be to some. Entities that promote and regulate scholarship, such as departments, funding organizations, internal review boards, academic societies, and scholarly journals should abide by this principle. Universities should take care to treat academic subunits such as departments, centers, and institutes with equal standards. The approval and regulation of these subunits should be based on judgments concerning scholarly or artistic merit alone.

There are many valuable methods and modes of intellectual inquiry. What's more, the attainment of truth requires the engagement of diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Free inquiry germinates disagreements and debates that vitalize the campus. Accordingly, departments and institutions should strive to be intellectually pluralistic in hiring, tenure, promotion and peer review. Work should be judged by its intellectual and creative force, its provocation of vital debate, and its potential to shed light on natural, social, and cultural phenomena. Institutions may rightly demand probative research, rigorous inquiry, and logical relationship of explanation or theory to data, but they may not demand that someone share a particular ideological, theoretical, or political commitment.

### IIIb. Teaching

Individual professors should be given discretion to determine course content, with exceptions made for courses that require agreement on basic content or method. Professors in class and in conference with students should aim to foster free inquiry, which entails being intellectually honest and welcoming reasoned disagreement. When contested questions arise, no orthodoxies or required opinions should prevail. Orthodoxy smothers the spirit of intellectual engagement and growth. All ideas relevant to the subject matter of the class must be expressible no matter how controversial or offensive they might be to some. Professors may express their views on debated questions but may not formally or informally require students to hold them or punish students for criticizing them or declining to embrace them.

Professors, not administrators or outsiders, should be granted authority to determine how to conduct their classes. They may require adherence to basic rules of civility in the classroom, but restrictions on speech should be strictly limited to those that serve the purpose of creating the conditions for free inquiry rather than being selectively applied to ideas, individuals, or groups. Ideas relevant to the course, however controversial or even shocking, should not be regarded by the university as forms of harm or harassment. Evaluation of student performance by professors should be based on academic standards applied equally to all students.

### IIIc. Extracurricular Speech and Free Speech on Campus

Freedom of expression outside the classroom, either by invited speakers or in communication among students and faculty, is essential to a vibrant campus culture. Extracurricular speech brings to campus a broad range of ideas beyond the formal curriculum and provides occasion for intellectual exchange and experimentation. Venues where free speech should obtain include

public forums and lectures, social media, and the kaleidoscopic multitude of everyday interchanges that enliven campus life.

The university has an obligation to protect all lawful speakers and to sanction those who violate the rights of others by materially disrupting speakers. The "heckler's veto" is a form of denying ideas and opinions to those who choose to hear them, including those who disagree with the speaker but have chosen to listen to a speech. Freedom for the expression of ideas must thrive in all domains of campus life.

The limits of speech in these extracurricular venues are those that generally apply in free speech jurisprudence, including genuine threats, deliberate incitement to imminent violence, constitutionally defined obscenity, copyright violations, bribery, plagiarism, fraud, libel and slander, and violations of privacy or confidentiality. In addition, institutions may enforce traditional time, place, and manner rules to ensure that speech does not interfere with necessary university functions.

As young adults who are learning to practice the virtues necessary for self-government, students should be free to form independent student groups or associations uninhibited by administrative interference. University funding and policies conditioning official recognition of student groups should be applied in a viewpoint neutral manner. Anti-discrimination principles must not be used in ways that require religious, political, or other types of groups for whom shared belief plays a constitutive role to admit to membership or leadership people who oppose the beliefs that define the groups.

Instructors should not be discriminated against in decisions pertaining to hiring, promotion, job security, or salary based on ideas expressed in extramural speech that would be protected in the public forum writ large, including criticism of institutional policies and actions. In exchange for this right, faculty members and students engaging in extramural speech must make it evident that they speak for themselves, not as spokespersons for the institution.

Faculty, administrators, trustees and political authorities should refrain from compelling scholars and students to endorse or tacitly affirm any opinion that is not necessary for the basic academic functioning of the university. Such loyalty tests are anathema to free minds. Compelled speech includes the requirement or pressure to express agreement with political or social causes in words or deeds, as well as the obligation to provide certain answers to ideological questions, or signal (even if only implicitly) agreement with certain ideas in order to gain employment or advance in rank or status.

The university and its units possess the right to speak publicly and internally on their own behalf, as long as they do so in a manner that does not harm the intellectual freedom they have an obligation to protect. They have a right—indeed a duty—to defend themselves against external and internal pressures that compromise intellectual freedom, including coercion to express support for or opposition to political ideologies or legislative efforts to prohibit “offensive,” “controversial,” or “divisive” ideas.

Whereas individual students and faculty members have the right to speak out regarding any matter, the institution and its units should speak out only about matters that clearly affect their normal operations and the intellectual freedom they must protect. Taking stances on matters extraneous to the operations of the university, including on moral, political, and constitutional or legal questions on which our society is divided, effectively establishes an orthodox view. This divides the campus into “insiders” and “outsiders,” hindering further exploration of important issues. In sum: if an academic institution is *not required* to adopt a position in order to fulfill its mission of intellectual freedom or operational capacity, it is *required not* to adopt a position.

Universities and their units should also refrain from publicly denouncing the research or extramural comments of members of the campus community with whom they disagree, lest they create official pariahs. Members of the campus community in their individual capacities may publicly critique each other’s positions, so long as they make it clear that they speak for themselves.

Administrators should seek to allocate resources to promote intellectual diversity and a climate conducive to free and vigorous inquiry within departments and across campus.

#### **IV. Guidelines for Efforts to Revitalize A Culture of Free Inquiry**

The standing model of university self-governance has been called into question by those who are not convinced that administrators and faculty have been fulfilling their duty to create a culture of free and vigorous inquiry. Consequently, state legislatures, trustees, regents, alumni groups, donors, and students have begun to play or demand larger roles in university governance. In some cases this may be justified, but in every case such efforts should be guided by the goal of revitalizing free and vigorous inquiry, informed by knowledge and appreciation of the conditions under which scholarship is best undertaken, students best educated, and campus life most vibrantly lived.

Any influence exerted by non-faculty entities must be motivated by the desire to protect and secure free inquiry, not to achieve a partisan goal. To justify increased influence, it must first be determined by clear and convincing evidence that faculty members and administrators are not adequately fulfilling their responsibilities.

It would be ideal if efforts to revitalize free and vigorous inquiry would be led by faculty themselves, as faculty must bear the day-to-day responsibility for ensuring that this culture flourishes. Faculty might form committees dedicated to understanding and strengthening the culture of free inquiry on campus, and educate students in the importance of this core university mission. Preparing matriculating students through noncoercive sessions and distributing materials elaborating the rights and obligations of cultivating free inquiry is one example of such effort. The right to freedom of speech necessarily includes the right to criticize and reject belief in a right to free speech and to disagree about its proper limits.

Administrators could help in this effort by speaking publicly about the university’s obligation to create conditions for excellent scholarship and teaching. They should also ensure that campus

bodies adjudicating disciplinary cases are knowledgeable about academic freedom and due process, and that they are sufficiently independent of the executive and legislative bodies and functions of the institution. A cardinal principle of justice, also applicable to campus life, holds that knowledgeable judges should be independent of prosecutors and legislators.

If there is clear and convincing evidence that faculty members and administrators are not adequately fulfilling their responsibilities to foster and defend a culture of free inquiry on campus, other agents including regents, trustees, students, and alumni groups in the wider campus network may and indeed should become involved. Such entities should take care not to dictate or prohibit any idea or argument, but to promote a culture of free inquiry in opposition to all policies and actions that directly or indirectly discourage robust discourse.

Trustees and regents should also oppose and resist government mandates that would harm the honest pursuit of truth and the cultivation of free inquiry, such as bans on disfavored topics and subjects. Government interventions should be a last resort, but governments (along with trustees and regents) may legitimately prohibit speech codes and related policies that inhibit or punish speech protected by free speech jurisprudence and academic freedom.

In addition, government and private donors may fund programs devoted to fields of inquiry that they think would enhance intellectual diversity and therefore contribute to the vigor of inquiry on campus, provided they specify and justify intellectual or pedagogical reasons for the effort. Such efforts add to free inquiry rather than limiting it.

## **V. Conclusion**

Institutional and faculty self-governance presuppose adherence and dedication to the work of fostering free and vigorous inquiry. This work is the basis of the trust reposed in the modern American university. The principles set forth herein provide a blueprint for efforts to restore the reciprocal rights and duties that constitute the foundation of this trust.

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