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Washington University affirms commitment to freedom of expression

Adopts principle drafted by faculty in support of open debate



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The need to respect and protect freedom of speech is the key cornerstone on which institutions of higher education are structured. Washington University in St. Louis is affirming its commitment to this open exchange of ideas by strongly endorsing a statement of principle regarding freedom of expression, as written by members of its faculty.



“One of the great contributions our university makes to society is the creation of new knowledge and new solutions to the world’s toughest challenges,” Chancellor Mark S. Wrighton said. “To fulfill that critical aspect of our mission — to truly make a positive difference, individually and collectively — we must be a community in which every one of us feels empowered to offer ideas and perspectives. We charged our faculty with the important task of developing this principle to help us sustain an open, creative, innovative and intellectually stimulating environment on our campuses.”

Written by a diverse and representative group of members of the faculty and adopted by the Washington University [Faculty Senate Council](#), the statement represents the culmination of a collaborative process. In this statement, the faculty affirm the university’s “unwavering commitment to freedom of expression and free exchange of ideas” for all members of the academic community — students, staff, faculty, administration and guests. It builds upon a [statement](#) developed this past summer by the Standing Committee on Facilitating Inclusive Classrooms that specifically addresses the necessary balance between rigor and respect in the university’s learning environment.



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engage,” the statement reads. It further states that the university should encourage civil discussion and “avoid all forms of punitive action in response to the expression of ideas” while ensuring “that no one misuses the authority conferred by the university to restrict such expression.”

“We simply cannot waver on the issue of open expression,” Provost Holden Thorp said. “This principle applies not only to the experience in our classrooms, but to the overall experience of being a member of our community. I’m grateful for the faculty’s leadership.”

The ultimate goal of the statement, according to its authors, is to make Washington University a stronger, more inclusive and more dynamic institution. This, they say, can only be accomplished when freedom of expression is unambiguously protected and promoted.

“This principle solidly and definitively commits the university to free and open exchange, based on a foundation of mutual respect,” said Timothy McBride, interim chair of the Faculty Senate Council and professor at the Brown School. “We formed a diverse faculty group to write the statement, using a process that fostered a productive dialogue with rigorous but respectful debate, leading to a statement adopted with unanimous consensus by the council. I am grateful for the hard work and collegiality used to develop this very important statement.”

The authors recommend that, in addition to supporting in principle a free and open exchange of ideas, the university community also needs to provide resources to its members in order to promote and encourage this activity.

“Those resources should include physical and virtual forums, academic panels and presentations, as well as funding and sponsorship of such means of public expression. In allocating such resources the university should focus on a principle of inclusivity, fostering as broad a range of ideas as possible from as many different constituencies of the university community as possible,” the statement reads.

The statement concludes with a quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes, who famously celebrated “not (only) free thought for those who agree with us, but freedom for the

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The entire statement is pasted below and is available online on the [Faculty Senate Council website](#).

Statement of Principle Regarding Freedom of Expression

Washington University in St. Louis begins its mission statement by asserting that the institution's primary aims are "to discover and disseminate knowledge, and protect the freedom of inquiry through research, teaching and learning." A commitment to the open exchange of ideas and information is fundamental to achieving these goals. Consequently, the university affirms its unwavering commitment to freedom of expression and the free exchange of ideas.

Since members of our university community engaged in research, teaching, learning, and community service routinely confront difficult and controversial questions, the university must vigilantly encourage and facilitate freedom of expression around contentious topics. Moreover, given the necessity for strong, healthy institutions to engage in critical self-reflection, the university should welcome challenges to its own policies. We affirm that the university should consider First Amendment principles as the baseline of its conduct pertaining to speech and that it should both protect and promote actions that ensure the open expression of a full range of viewpoints.

To protect the freedom of expression, the university should respect the expression of ideas, even those that are offensive or unpopular, by all members of the university community: students, staff, faculty, administration, and guests. That respect for expression should apply to all speech and writing by members of the university community, encompassing any forum in which members of that community engage.

The university community should continue to make resources available to its members to promote robust, wide-ranging debate and discussion. Those resources should include physical and virtual forums, academic panels and presentations, as well as funding and sponsorship of such means of public expression. In allocating such resources the university should focus on a principle of inclusivity, fostering as broad a range of ideas as possible from as many different constituencies of the university community as possible.

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university to restrict such expression. However, we recognize that the free exchange of ideas requires civility and some measure of orderliness to be effective. Accordingly, the university should encourage civil discussion through positive norms and examples, responding to speech that offends groups and members of the university community not by interdiction but by encouraging further discussion and opportunities for education about contentious issues. Additionally, the university is justified in taking reasonable, unbiased actions to facilitate orderly discussion in certain settings, especially non-public ones. Unacceptably injurious or dangerous speech (meaning speech that harasses, defames, threatens, or unjustifiably intrudes on the privacy of specific persons) makes no positive contribution to the free exchange of ideas and can in fact discourage free discussion. When sanctions are needed to protect the rights of community members subjected to injurious or dangerous speech, the university should employ a transparent process of adjudication.

As a community, we affirm that these actions for protecting and promoting freedom of expression and the free exchange of ideas make the university a stronger, more inclusive, more dynamic institution. Indeed, we submit that our institution would no longer truly function as a university if it failed to provide the grounds for robust debate and deliberation. In this light, it is incumbent on the entire community of Washington University to remember that free and open discourse requires, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, “not [only] free thought for those who agree with us, but freedom for the thought that we hate.”

Endorsed by

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