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# L. Policy on Speech and Expression

*Approved June 8, 2017*

As an institution of higher education, one specifically committed to the Catholic and Jesuit tradition, Georgetown University is committed to free and open inquiry, deliberation and debate in all matters, and the untrammelled verbal and nonverbal expression of ideas. It is Georgetown University's policy to provide all members of the University community, including faculty, students, and staff, the broadest possible latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge, and learn.

The ideas of different members of the University community will often and naturally conflict. It is not the proper role of a university to insulate individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. Deliberation or debate may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the University community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or ill conceived.

Individual members of the University community have the right to judge the value of ideas, and to act on those judgments not by seeking to suppress speech, but by openly and vigorously contesting those arguments and ideas that they oppose. Fostering the ability of members of the University community to engage with each other in an effective and responsible manner is an essential part of the University's educational mission.

The freedom to debate and discuss the merits of competing ideas does not mean that individuals may say whatever they wish, wherever they wish. The University prohibits expression that violates the law, falsely defames a specific individual, constitutes a genuine threat, violates the University's harassment policy, or unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests. In addition, the University may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of the institution. Finally, to the extent that appointment letters, confidentiality agreements or policies, professional conduct policies, or HR policies regulate conduct that may include speech and expression, they are not superseded by this policy. But these are narrow exceptions to the general principle of freedom of expression, and it is vitally important that these exceptions not be used in a manner that is inconsistent with the University's commitment to a free and open discussion of ideas.

As a corollary to the University's commitment to protect and promote free expression, members of the University community must also act in conformity with the principle of free expression. Although members of the University community are free to criticize and contest the views expressed by other members of the community, or by individuals who are invited to campus, they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe. To this end, the University has a solemn responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless freedom of deliberation and debate, but also to protect that freedom when others attempt to restrict it.

In 1990 Ernest Boyer, President of Carnegie Foundation wrote, "[A] university is an open, honest community, a place where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected, and where civility is powerfully affirmed."<sup>[2]</sup> Because it is essential to free and open inquiry, deliberation, and debate, all members of the University community

share in the responsibility for maintaining civil and respectful discourse. But concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as a justification for closing off the discussion of ideas, no matter how offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members of our community.

## Endnotes

1. This policy borrows from the Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression of the University of Chicago and the 1989 statement of Rev. James Walsh, S.J., Department of Theology (<https://studentaffairs.georgetown.edu/policies/student-organizations/speech-expression#Preamble> (<http://studentaffairs.georgetown.edu/policies/student-organizations/speech-expression#Preamble>)) ([Return to Text](#))
2. Ernest L. Boyer, *Campus Life: In Search of Community*, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Mar. 14, 1990, available at <http://boyerarchives.messiah.edu/files/Documents1/1000%200001%200251ocr.pdf> (<http://boyerarchives.messiah.edu/files/Documents1/1000%200001%200251ocr.pdf>). ([Return to Text](#))



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