

We are concerned about recent incidents at MICA in which instructors have been essentially silenced because their offered curriculum or teaching style were deemed offensive. Faculty are increasingly reluctant to teach subject matter and express views in class that might make some students or colleagues uncomfortable, thereby opening faculty members to complaints and endangering their job performance reviews. Just as disquieting, some students fear expressing controversial opinions or showing work to which others may object. We are troubled that an atmosphere of intolerance, censorship, and self-censorship is taking hold at our school. Academic freedom and freedom of expression are core values that should unite all of us at MICA. They are especially important to an institution such as ours that stresses and seeks to encourage intellectual and artistic risk-taking.

We are calling, first, on the MICA community—faculty, administration, staff, and students—to reaffirm the fundamental commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression as set down in the *Faculty Handbook*, which says, in part, “[The College] cannot fulfill its purposes, in serving the common good, of giving impetus to creative activity in art and design, and transmitting, evaluating, and extending knowledge if it requires conformity with any orthodoxy of content or method. Academic freedom is essential to the free search for truth, and its free exposition, and to the free play of the imagination. Academic freedom in its teaching aspects is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and the rights of students in learning.” The Handbook goes on to affirm that there are responsibilities that correspond to this freedom: “All components of the College have a responsibility to exemplify and support these freedoms in the interests of reasoned inquiry. Membership in the academic community imposes on students, faculty members and others, the acknowledgement of their right to express differing opinions, and the fostering and defense of intellectual honesty, freedom of inquiry and instruction, and free expression.” In the present context that also means that we have an obligation to foster, in our classrooms, in our ways of responding to ideas, art, and opinions, a tolerant yet critical learning space where discomfort may be a step toward deliberation, respectful contestation, and bold thinking rather than an invitation to silencing and censorship.

Second, we call on the administration to adhere to the principles of academic freedom and to end practices, policies, and decisions that violate academic freedom. Since this freedom is inherent to the very definition of teaching and learning, violations of this right actually contradict the administration’s own educational responsibilities and best intentions. We call on the administration to treat academic freedom as one of its major guidelines when new policies are implemented and when present ones are invoked. The *Faculty Handbook* reminds us that “students are entitled to an atmosphere conducive to learning and supportive treatment in all aspects of the individual teacher-student relationship.” As long as those conditions are met, no professor in good-standing may be sidelined or silenced because some administrators, students, or fellow teachers take issue with the content of that professor’s syllabus or find it controversial. This imperative also holds for students. They too must not be silenced because the ideas they express or the art they create may be offensive to some.

Finally, in the interest of protecting academic freedom at MICA, and of fostering a climate of free and open expression on campus, we would like to encourage the college leadership to adopt the principles of the Chicago Statement, established in 2014 by the Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago and currently adopted by over 70 universities.

<https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf>

The Statement reminds us that "it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive." Additionally, it states that "debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed. It is for the individual members of the University community, not for the University as an institution, to make those judgments for themselves, and to act on those judgments not by seeking to suppress speech, but by openly and vigorously contesting the ideas that they oppose. Indeed, fostering the ability of members of the University community to engage in such debate and deliberation in an effective and responsible manner is an essential part of the University's educational mission." However, the Chicago Statement does not insist that all speech is categorically worthy of protection. It notes that the institution "may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the University."

The Chicago Statement is especially important for a college of art and design. An atmosphere of free expression is essential to artistic endeavor. When faculty and students do not feel free to express views or discuss content others may find objectionable, self-censorship prevails. This form of censorship is harmful to creative voices of all kinds and breeds intolerance, resentment, and mistrust. If MICA students are to enjoy a climate of free and open expression, our faculty must be secure in their ability to teach controversial material, just as our students must be secure in their freedom to create controversial work. Further, we believe that adopting the Chicago Statement will advance MICA's goals of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Globalization. An atmosphere of free expression is conducive to the flowering of, and a tolerance for, a diversity of views and ideas and will strengthen individual and institutional respect for all who add to, and deliberate over, that diversity.

We urge the administration, students, and faculty to adopt the Chicago Statement in order to protect the fundamental principles of academic freedom and tolerance.