
The Words that Guide Us

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The University of Pennsylvania of today is a product of each of its 284 years of history. Our storied traditions help us rise to contemporary challenges and opportunities.

Today, Penn is introducing two new institutional positions: a statement of [University Values](https://www.upenn.edu/about/university-values) (<https://www.upenn.edu/about/university-values>) and a statement [Upholding Academic Independence](https://penntoday.upenn.edu/announcements/upholding-academic-independence) (<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/announcements/upholding-academic-independence>). These statements sit alongside two older collections of words, one from last year, and one from 1755.

The words from 1755 comprise our Latin motto, [Leges Sine Moribus Vanæ](https://archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-history/seals-arms-usage/#:~:text=The%20University%20motto%20is%20the,the%20first%20Provost%2C%20William%20Smith.) (<https://archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-history/seals-arms-usage/#:~:text=The%20University%20motto%20is%20the,the%20first%20Provost%2C%20William%20Smith.>), commonly translated into English as “Laws without morals are useless.” These few words communicate deeply. The motto urges us to do what is good and practical, and also what is right. This spirit has guided Penn for centuries, and I am proud to be part of an institution built upon such a motto.

The words from 2023 were expressed by [In Principle and Practice](https://in-principle-and-practice.upenn.edu/) (<https://in-principle-and-practice.upenn.edu/>). This strategic framework was the product of a yearlong process to address how Penn’s history and present resources can help guide our approaches to benefiting the world. The words reflect how we are anchored, interwoven, inventive, and engaged, and they chart a course for our actions. We are on that course now. We have already announced [Penn Washington](https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/penn-washington-house-universitys-engagement-dc) (<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/penn-washington-house-universitys-engagement-dc>) to strengthen our position in our nation’s Capital. We are simultaneously integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into research and education, advancing the arts, and accelerating efforts to battle climate change. We will soon be announcing an internal initiative to stimulate even more creative approaches to support our strategic framework. Like our motto from 1755, the words of In Principle and Practice also guide us.

Today, we introduce a statement of [University Values](https://www.upenn.edu/about/university-values) (<https://www.upenn.edu/about/university-values>). These values are also a product of our long history, and yet re-presenting them in new words today carries added importance. Over the past months we have found ourselves reacting to the events of the world and responding to events on our campus. Both the [Presidential Commission on Countering Hate and Building Community](https://president.upenn.edu/initiatives/presidential-commission) (<https://president.upenn.edu/initiatives/presidential-commission>) and the [University Task Force on Antisemitism](https://antisemitism-action-plan.upenn.edu/home) (<https://antisemitism-action-plan.upenn.edu/home>) called for an explicit

articulation of our values to help guide us through these challenges. Like the committee that developed *In Principle and Practice*, the Task Force and Commission sought and received broad input about our values from the Penn community. The current statement reflects this input and aspires to capture what is distinctive about Penn. Our values were always there and are best revealed through our actions. But the words we use to express them are guideposts along the way. I urge you to read and reflect upon those words.

Today, Penn also introduces [Upholding Academic Independence](https://penntoday.upenn.edu/announcements/upholding-academic-independence) (<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/announcements/upholding-academic-independence>). Over the years, and with increasing frequency, leaders across the University—indeed across most universities—have made public statements in response to external events. By and large, these messages sought to provide acknowledgement and solidarity following often horrific circumstances. Although well-meaning, these institutional messages fundamentally compete with the free and unencumbered creation and expression of ideas by individuals. Going forward, the University of Pennsylvania and its leaders will refrain from institutional statements made in response to local and world events. By quieting Penn’s institutional voice, we hope to amplify the expertise and voices within.

The release of this new guidance should not be construed as fear to take a studied position. Quite the opposite, it is a confirmation of our commitment to academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas. Likewise, the timing should not be interpreted as a response to past or upcoming events, or prior institutional positions. We will, of course, continue to communicate about policies and activities that have direct relevance to the University’s missions and its operations. This new guidance represents the culmination of intensive deliberation about how Penn and its leaders can best support our mission and our community—now, and moving forward.

The University of Pennsylvania is a scholarly community, reflecting a complex set of resources, relationships, and responsibilities. We are guided by framing and foundational words from hundreds of years ago, from last year, and from today. Over time, new words will capture and shape how we define and describe ourselves and chart our course. We are, and hope to forever be, a work in progress, and an institution that creates and disseminates knowledge for good.