

To: President Mike Schill

From: The President's Advisory Committee on Free Expression and Institutional Speech

Date: August 9, 2024

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We submit to you our Statement on Free Expression and Institutional Speech, approved at our committee meeting on August 6, 2024.

In response to your charge of February 19, 2024, we have worked together to understand the issues at stake, both as a matter of first principles and as applied questions within the Northwestern community. We read an extensive set of materials and held listening sessions with key stakeholder groups, including representatives from Student Affairs, the Associated Student Government, graduate student leadership, the Office of General Counsel and the Title IX Office, and the Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion, in addition to meeting with the Deans' Council, the Faculty Senate, the leadership of the Block Museum, Provost Hagerty, and Chairman Barris and the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees. We also met together, as a committee of the whole or in committee subgroups, for well over 20 hours of discussion.

We would like to record our gratitude to Kevin Leonard, University Historian, and Nia Crossley JD '24 for their research assistance, and to Julie Allen, Nathan Taylor, and Katherine Carey from the Office of the President for their exceptional assistance in supporting the committee's work.

We have enjoyed working together and are honored to have had the opportunity to serve on this committee. We are all in agreement with the resulting statement.

Sincerely,

Erin F. Delaney  
Chair

Henry Bienen

Eli Finkel

Vicky Kalogera

Toni-Marie Montgomery

Gary Saul Morson

Milan Mrksich

Peter Slevin

Natasha Trethewey

Christopher Udry

Mary Zimmerman

President's Advisory Committee  
Statement on Free Expression and Institutional Speech

Universities exist to pursue knowledge in the service of truth. This pursuit depends both on the freedom to challenge orthodoxy and on the opportunity to develop perspectives grounded in evidence and shaped by the give and take of intellectual engagement.

A spirit of inquiry animates the work of the university. Through restless, robust questioning of the status quo, addressing present-day problems and historic wrongs, our University community strives to deliver insight and invention. Whether in concert with prevailing wisdom or in defiance of it, Northwestern University faculty and students have wide-ranging liberty to pursue their scholarly, pedagogical, intellectual, and artistic activities. Northwestern's motto, "whatsoever things are true," reminds us to persevere in our mission.

At Northwestern, our aspirations for intellectual engagement are rooted in our commitment to dialogue. Over fifty years ago, the influential Faculty Planning Committee's *Community of Scholars* report identified among its priorities developing "the complex of qualities that characterize the educated [person] as a social being." Social beings operate in community with one another. In dialogue, participants listen as well as speak, allow—as far as possible—the good faith of others' arguments, and remain open to the possibility of persuasion. Even if unmoved in their views, they will be better able to defend them after the crucible of debate. It is through inclusive engagement across difference, where arguments encounter counterarguments, that learning happens.

Dialogue is not domination or denigration. Shutting down or shouting down a speaker with whom one disagrees not only demonstrates a refusal to listen but also prevents others from doing so. Speech that impedes or is intended to prevent others' participation hinders the vitality of our intellectual community. In this light, free speech is necessary—but not sufficient—to meet the University's core purpose: We must cultivate the modes of speech and listening that promote productive dialogue. Northwestern cannot condone speech that threatens, harasses, or defames other individuals, or hinders the rights of others to learn.

We recommend that the University regularly review its policies with respect to students, faculty, and staff to ensure their consistency with our commitment to free expression and open dialogue. All policies should reaffirm Northwestern's deep commitment to academic freedom while more clearly articulating University responsibilities against harassment, intimidation, and discrimination to ensure a high-quality pedagogical experience. Northwestern has the right and duty to specify limits and boundaries of free expression with respect to time, place, and manner, and we note that the University can and should stipulate that violations of its policies entail consequences.

The responsibility to maximize inclusive dialogue carries through to the leadership of the University itself. The threat of coercion exists when any member of our faculty, staff, or administration presumes to speak for other members of our community through the issuing of collective statements. All members of our community may choose to speak publicly on controversial topics and to identify themselves as a member of our community, consistent with our policies and terms of employment. They should not do so, however, as official representatives of Northwestern or its constituent parts (e.g., as President, Provost, Vice-President, Dean, department chair, unit director, or center director).

The exception to this rule covers matters that directly affect University operations. But even such statements should be rare: Northwestern must take pains to avoid coercing dissenting community members into silence.

By limiting University statements, we do not endorse a simplistic vision of “university neutrality.” The very reason for this limitation is our firm commitment to values about which we are not neutral: fostering open and equitable dialogue and advancing the university’s core mission—the pursuit of knowledge in the service of truth.