

Statement of Principle Regarding Freedom of Expression

September 6, 2016

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.

The university should avoid all forms of punitive action in response to the expression of ideas, and it should likewise ensure that no one misuses the authority conferred by the 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

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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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