

Statement on Academic Freedom and Freedom of Speech¹

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May 2024

The College of Social Science at Michigan State University has an obligation to support the free exchange of ideas in the spirit of intellectual inquiry and to promote academic freedom. Our sponsorship and/or advertising of events does not imply the endorsement of the specific viewpoints shared in those settings. Rather, it simply indicates that the College is committed to contributing to an intellectually vibrant environment where faculty, students, and staff have opportunities to expose themselves to new ideas and diverse perspectives in the service of critical inquiry and a broader understanding.

Thus, as Dean of the College of Social Science, I will:

- a) Encourage all individuals in the College to engage with a broad range of ideas;
- b) Continue to disseminate information about talks and events occurring at the university;
- c) Support the autonomy of units within the College (and university) to determine their own programming;
- d) Continue to promote the College of Social Science Community Code of Conduct which emphasizes civility and respect;
- e) Enforce university policies regarding the disruption of events;
- f) Refrain from issuing College-level statements on current events except for events that originate on-campus and directly relate to the core academic mission of the College.

This statement is based on the following core ideas:

- 1. I have a duty to support academic freedom.** Public universities are best served when they promote the free expression of a wide range of viewpoints and steadfastly avoid institutional orthodoxy. Notwithstanding speech that constitutes a true threat or harassment (or otherwise violates university policy), I believe the College of Social Science should provide platforms for a range of viewpoints so ideas can be drawn out into the open and evaluated. Individual faculty members and students are free and empowered to generate new ideas and to critically evaluate existing ideas. To quote the 1967 Kalven Report: *“The university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic”* and *“To perform its mission in society, a university*

¹ My statement borrows strongly from the perspective espoused by Dean Jenny S. Martinez from Stanford’s Law School as stated in a 22 March 2023 message to the Stanford Law School Community. I thank Dean Martinez for making that statement public. This statement is effective Spring of 2024 but may be updated if relevant MSU policies change.

must sustain an extraordinary environment of freedom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures.” This perspective means the College will show extraordinary restraint on endorsing specific positions beyond affirmations of the importance of free inquiry, civil discourse, civic engagement, and the importance of mutual respect. To do otherwise risks contributing to an environment where individual faculty members and students may feel coerced to adopt an official position because it was issued by the College of Social Science. Such conditions infringe upon academic freedom.

Excerpt from the Chicago Principles: *In a word, the University’s fundamental commitment is to the principle that debate or deliberation 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 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.*

See:

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

2. I support free speech and the right

to learn. Drawing on ideas about the First Amendment advanced by Erwin Chemerinsky and Howard Gillman: “Freedom of speech does not protect a right to shout down others so they cannot be heard.” I believe the College’s role is to make sure that units have the autonomy to create platforms where diverse views are exchanged in a civil way. Likewise, this includes the rights of students, faculty, and community members to be able to listen to an appointed speaker when they attend events. Disruption of university proceedings infringes upon the right to listen and learn. This flows from the MSU statement on Free Speech: *The robust exchange of ideas and perspectives can be indicative of a healthy intellectual environment. However, actions that directly or indirectly inhibit the freedoms and rights enjoyed by others are anathema to maintenance of a collegial environment.*

I hope all speakers are willing to engage in respectful question-and-answer sessions with audience members to facilitate dialogue and conversation around controversial subjects. Regardless, the College will not actively censor ideas or prejudge the content of talks based on titles, abstracts, or the inferred motives of speakers. To quote Dean Martinez: *“There is temptation to a system in which people holding views perceived by some as harmful or offensive are not allowed to speak,*

to avoid giving legitimacy to their views or upsetting members of the community, but history teaches us that this is a temptation to be avoided. I can think of no circumstance in which giving those in authority the right to decide what is and is not acceptable content for speech has ended well.” In that spirit, individuals are free to organize counter events to provide alternative perspectives, protest in ways that do not disrupt university operations, offer public criticisms and rebuttals, and to ignore or avoid events that are incompatible with their worldviews and perspectives.

3. I believe we have a collective responsibility to explore the spectrum of societal ideas.

Intellectual humility is a virtue. If we are to truly engage with the breadth of perspectives on important issues, it is not enough to sponsor events that are consistent with our views and protest events that conflict with our ideas. We should strive to challenge ourselves and sponsor a range of events to explore the breadth of worldviews and perspectives, even if a single event is best served by having a narrower focus.

Likewise, we should strive to engage with speakers and perspectives that illuminate topics rather than simply inflame existing tensions.

4. I believe that MSU community members should show respect for one another, promote human dignity, and strive to create an inclusive and tolerant environment. Academic communities have a special obligation to promote tolerance, civility, and inclusivity so that all members can benefit from the vibrancy of an intellectual community. We should not support actions that deny access to learning environments or act in ways that denigrate others. Individuals should not fear for their physical safety on a college campus. A commitment to promoting dignity demands that we treat members of our community with respect. We are free to disagree, but we strive to embody civility in our interactions.

Excerpt from the MSU Policy on Free Speech:

Lawful and peaceable public demonstrations are permitted by the University and are protected by the law, without regard to the point of view being expressed. Members of the University's community of scholars are free to organize, debate, pass resolutions, distribute leaflets, circulate petitions, picket, and otherwise express themselves regarding issues of political and social interest. However, no individual or group of individuals may disrupt other campus activities or programs.

The robust exchange of ideas and perspectives can be indicative of a healthy intellectual environment. However, actions that directly or indirectly inhibit the freedoms and rights enjoyed by others are anathema to maintenance of a collegial environment. Under the civil and criminal law, as well as the University's ordinances and policies, it is impermissible for an individual or group to deny free expression to others who are engaged in peaceable discourse or dissent, to deny any person's freedom of movement on the University's property, to obstruct ingress and egress with respect to buildings or public areas, to endanger or threaten to endanger any person on University property, or to otherwise disrupt the ability of other persons to participate and enjoy the benefits of campus life.

See:

<https://trustees.msu.edu/about/statement-free-speech.html>