

Report on Institutional Voice in the University

The purpose of the university is to pursue truth. In that pursuit, the university as an institution can never be neutral, because we believe in the value of seeking truth through open inquiry, debate, and weighing the evidence, as opposed to mere assertion or unjustified belief.

What counts as truth varies across domains from physics to poetry, and so do the methods we use to seek after it, which include experiment, interpretation, reasoning, and creative imagination. But no matter the domain or method, ideas in the university are always under review. They are subject to challenge, reconsideration, and revision in the light of fresh evidence and new questions, according to the methods and standards emerging from the expertise of the academic disciplines. Through this activity, the university serves the crucial social role of contributing to knowledge and transmitting it to the next generation.

To succeed, the university cultivates an environment in which its members can research, teach, and learn. This is its core function. It commits itself to the values of free inquiry, intellectual expertise, and productive argument among divergent points of view. These values, proper to the university environment, require nurture, support and defense in order for members of the university to do their work.

Accordingly, the university has a responsibility to speak out to protect and promote its core function. Its leaders must communicate the value of the university's central activities. They must defend the university's autonomy and academic freedom when threatened – if, for example, outside forces seek to determine what students the university can admit, what subjects it can teach, or which research it supports. And they must speak out on issues directly relevant to the university's operation.

The university and its leaders should not, however, issue official statements about public matters that do not directly affect the university's core function.

First, the integrity and credibility of the institution are compromised when the university speaks officially on matters outside its institutional area of expertise. Faculty members, speaking for themselves, have expertise in their respective domains of knowledge, and they may often speak about what they know. In so doing, however, they do not speak for the university. The university's leaders are hired for their skill in leading an institution of higher education, not their expertise in public affairs. When speaking in their official roles, therefore, they should restrict themselves to matters within their area of institutional expertise and responsibility: the running of a university.

Second, if the university and its leaders become accustomed to issuing official statements about matters beyond the core function of the university, they will inevitably come under intense pressure to do so from multiple, competing sides on nearly every imaginable issue of the day. This is the reality of contemporary public life in an era of social media and political polarization. Those pressures, coming from inside and outside the university, will distract energy and attention from the university's essential purpose. The university is not a government, tasked with engaging the full range of foreign and domestic policy issues, and its leaders are not, and must not be, selected for their personal political beliefs.

Third, if the university adopts an official position on an issue beyond its core function, it will be understood to side with one perspective or another on that issue. Given the diversity of viewpoints within the university, choosing a side, or appearing to do so can undermine the inclusivity of the university community. It may make it more difficult for some members of the community to express their views when they differ from the university's official position. The best way for the university to acknowledge pressing public events is by redoubling intellectual engagement through classes, conferences, scholarship, and teaching that draw on the expert knowledge of its faculty.

As a community united in a common purpose, the university cares about the well-being of all its members. We feel empathy for those affected by events of great moment, whether wars, natural disasters, or different forms of persecution. In a university that draws on the whole country and the entire world, almost any significant national or global event is likely to affect someone in our community personally. Yet in issuing official statements of empathy, the university runs the risk of appearing to care more about some places and events than others. And because few, if any, world events can be entirely isolated from conflicting viewpoints, issuing official empathy statements runs the risk of alienating some members of the community by expressing implicit solidarity with others. Furthermore, anodyne official statements may cause further distress to the very groups they are meant to comfort.

The most compassionate course of action is therefore not to issue official statements of empathy. Instead, the university should continue and expand the efforts of its pastoral arms in the different schools and residential houses to support affected community members. It must dedicate resources to training staff most directly in contact with affected community members. These concrete actions should prove, in the end, more effective and meaningful than public statements.

The principles articulated and recommended here should apply to any person or body authorized or purporting to speak on behalf of the university or its component parts. That should include the president, provost, and all deans as well as heads of departments, centers, and programs; it should also in principle extend to university governing boards and faculty bodies (such as faculty councils and the faculties of schools and departments acting collectively). There will be close cases where reasonable people disagree about whether a given issue is or is not directly related to the core function of the university. The university's policy in those situations should be to err on the side of avoiding official statements. The university should develop a process for implementing this policy.

When pressure builds on the university to make an official statement, as will sometimes happen, the university should refer publicly to its policy. It should clarify that the reason for its silence is the belief that the purpose of the university is best served by speaking only on matters directly relevant to its function and not by issuing declarations on other matters, however important in themselves. Individuals within the university, exercising their academic freedom, sometimes make statements that occasion strong disagreement. When this happens, the university should clarify that they do not speak for the university and that no one is authorized to speak on behalf of the university except the university's leadership.

Some centers, clinics, institutes, and programs in the university, in fields like medicine, public health, government, education, law, and beyond, translate knowledge into action through reports, white papers, and client representation. Those functions should continue. Those bodies should not, however, purport to speak on behalf of the university or beyond their domain expertise, and they should not extend their zone of expertise unreasonably.

Let us be clear: the university is not a neutral institution. It values open inquiry, expertise, and diverse points of view, for these are the means through which it pursues truth. The policy of speaking officially only on matters directly related to the university's core function, not beyond, serves those values. It should enable the university to endure and flourish, providing its unique public good even – and especially – in times of intense public controversy.

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