

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The Yale graduate school is committed to the protection of free inquiry and expression in the classroom and throughout the school community. In this, the school reflects the university's commitment to and policy on freedom of expression as eloquently stated in the Woodward Report (Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression at Yale, 1974), which states, in part:

The primary function of a university is to discover and disseminate knowledge by means of research and teaching. To fulfill this function a free interchange of ideas is necessary not only within its walls but with the world beyond as well. It follows that the university must do everything possible to ensure within it the fullest degree of intellectual freedom. The history of intellectual growth and discovery clearly demonstrates the need for unfettered freedom, the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable. To curtail free expression strikes twice at intellectual freedom, for whoever deprives another of the right to state unpopular views necessarily also deprives others of the right to listen to those views.

We take a chance, as the First Amendment takes a chance, when we commit ourselves to the idea that the results of free expression are to the general benefit in the long run, however unpleasant they may appear at the time. The validity of such a belief cannot be demonstrated conclusively. It is a belief of recent historical development, even within universities, one embodied in American constitutional doctrine but not widely shared outside the academic world, and denied in theory and in practice by much of the world most of the time.

Because few other institutions in our society have the same central function, few assign such high priority to freedom of expression. Few are expected to. Because no other kind of institution combines the discovery and dissemination of basic knowledge with teaching, none confronts quite the same problems as a university.

For if a university is a place for knowledge, it is also a special kind of small society. Yet it is not primarily a fellowship, a club, a circle of friends, a replica of the civil society outside it. Without sacrificing its central purpose, it cannot make its primary and dominant value the fostering of friendship, solidarity, harmony, civility, or mutual respect. To be sure, these are important values; other institutions may properly assign them the highest, and not merely a subordinate, priority; and a good university will seek and may in some significant measure attain these ends. But it will never let these values, important as they are, override its central purpose. We value freedom of expression precisely because it provides a forum for the new, the provocative, the disturbing, and the unorthodox. Free speech is a barrier to the tyranny of authoritarian or even majority opinion as to the rightness or wrongness of particular doctrines or thoughts.

If the priority assigned to free expression by the nature of a university is to be maintained in practice, clearly the responsibility for maintaining that priority rests with its members. By voluntarily taking up membership in a university and thereby asserting a claim to its rights and privileges, members also acknowledge

the existence of certain obligations upon themselves and their fellows. Above all, every member of the university has an obligation to permit free expression in the university. No member has a right to prevent such expression. Every official of the university, moreover, has a special obligation to foster free expression and to ensure that it is not obstructed.

The strength of these obligations, and the willingness to respect and comply with them, probably depend less on the expectation of punishment for violation than they do on the presence of a widely shared belief in the primacy of free expression. Nonetheless, we believe that the positive obligation to protect and respect free expression shared by all members of the university should be enforced by appropriate formal sanctions, because obstruction of such expression threatens the central function of the university. We further believe that such sanctions should be made explicit, so that potential violators will be aware of the consequences of their intended acts.

In addition to the university's primary obligation to protect free expression there are also ethical responsibilities assumed by each member of the university community, along with the right to enjoy free expression. Though these are much more difficult to state clearly, they are of great importance. If freedom of expression is to serve its purpose and thus the purpose of the university, it should seek to enhance understanding. Shock, hurt, and anger are not consequences to be weighed lightly. No member of the community with a decent respect for others should use, or encourage others to use, slurs and epithets intended to discredit another's race, ethnic group, religion, or sex. It may sometimes be necessary in a university for civility and mutual respect to be superseded by the need to guarantee free expression. The values superseded are nevertheless important, and every member of the university community should consider them in exercising the fundamental right to free expression.

We have considered the opposing argument that behavior which violates these social and ethical considerations should be made subject to formal sanctions, and the argument that such behavior entitles others to prevent speech they might regard as offensive. Our conviction that the central purpose of the university is to foster the free access of knowledge compels us to reject both of these arguments. They assert a right to prevent free expression. They rest upon the assumption that speech can be suppressed by anyone who deems it false or offensive. They deny what Justice Holmes termed "freedom for the thought that we hate." They make the majority, or any willful minority, the arbiters of truth for all. If expression may be prevented, censored, or punished, because of its content or because of the motives attributed to those who promote it, then it is no longer free. It will be subordinated to other values that we believe to be of lower priority in a university.

The conclusions we draw, then, are these: even when some members of the university community fail to meet their social and ethical responsibilities, the paramount obligation of the university is to protect their right to free expression. This obligation can and should be enforced by appropriate formal sanctions. If the university's overriding commitment to free expression is to be sustained, secondary social and ethical responsibilities must be left to the informal processes of suasion, example, and argument.

See also <https://studentlife.yale.edu/guidance-regarding-free-expression-and-peaceable-assembly-students-yale>.