

Free and Open Academic Inquiry and Debate on Our Campuses is Essential to Our Democracy and National Well-being

March 3, 2022

Colleges and universities exist to examine complex issues, challenges, and ideas, and to provide a forum in which issues and opinions can be explored and openly debated. In our intensely politicized and divided country, with social media and societal silos coarsening already heated conversations, this can be extraordinarily challenging. Yet, fostering a rigorous and civil exchange of ideas has never been more important. To best serve American society, higher education institutions are committed to transparent intellectual inquiry and academic excellence, free speech, and civil discourse. It is incumbent on our governmental institutions to share and support this commitment.

Efforts to suppress inquiry, curb discussion, and limit what can be studied violate the basic principles of free speech and an open exchange of ideas, and undermine the very purpose of higher education. Nonetheless, some elected officials have proposed measures foreclosing evaluation of complex and challenging ideas.

The undersigned higher education associations and organizations—representing two- and four-year, public and private colleges and universities—believe this development threatens our civic health and the ability of the United States to compete globally. If American higher education is to continue to support our economy and national security as we always have done, an unshakable commitment to robust intellectual inquiry and engagement is required.

Controversial and contentious topics deserve a place in the curriculum, but no matter how vigorous the classroom discussion, it should be respectful. Some campus speech is unacceptable, such as speech that violates the law, defames individuals, or threatens violence. Outside a few narrow exceptions, proposals to ban speech based on the idea expressed are not only constitutionally suspect but fundamentally at odds with the values of a free and open society.

All members of the campus community must be able to speak their minds freely, even if some hold opinions that others find objectionable, factually unsupportable, or abhorrent. The answer to speech with which one disagrees is more speech, not enforced silence. Open academic inquiry and vigorous debate are core values of higher education, and America generally, and we must never waver in our commitment to these vital principles.

Sincerely,

American Council on Education
Achieving the Dream
ACPA-College Student Educators International
American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare
American Association of Colleges and Universities
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers
American Association of Community Colleges
American Association of Directors of Psychiatry Residency Training
American Association of Physics Teachers
American Association of State Colleges and Universities
American Association of University Professors
American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges
American Dental Education Association
American Indian Higher Education Consortium
American Mathematical Society
American Society of Biomechanics
Asociación de Colegios y Universidades Privadas de Puerto Rico (ACUP) [The
Association of Private Colleges and Universities of Puerto Rico]
Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA)
Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE)
Association for Women in Mathematics
Association of American Medical Colleges
Association of American Universities
Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities
Association of College and University Housing Officers-International
Association of College Unions International
Association of Community College Trustees
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges
Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities (AICCU)
Association of Independent Colleges & Universities in Massachusetts
Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania
Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Rhode Island
Association of Independent Colleges of Arts & Design
Association of Independent Kentucky Colleges and Universities
Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities
Association of Pathology Chairs
Association of Presbyterian Colleges & Universities
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
Association of Research Libraries
Association of University and College Counseling Center Directors
Association of Vermont Independent Colleges (AVIC)
Biophysical Society
Campus Compact

Council for Christian Colleges & Universities
Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities
Common App
Conference for Mercy Higher Education
Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges
Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area
Consortium on Financing Higher Education
Council for Advancement and Support of Education
Council for Opportunity in Education
Council of Graduate Schools
Council of Independent Colleges
Council of Independent Nebraska Colleges Foundation
Council on Governmental Relations
Council on Social Work Education
EDUCAUSE
Graduate Management Admission Council
Great Lakes Colleges Association
Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work
Higher Education Consultants Association
Higher Learning Commission
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
Independent Colleges of Washington
Kansas Independent College Association
Louisiana Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
Middle States Commission on Higher Education
NAFSA: Association of International Educators
NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
National Association for Campus Activities
National Association for College Admission Counseling
National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO)
National Association of College and University Business Officers
National Association of Colleges and Employers
National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
National Association of System Heads
New American Colleges and Universities
New England Commission of Higher Education
New Hampshire College and University Council
NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation
NODA-Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education
North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
Oregon Alliance of Independent Colleges and Universities
Phi Beta Kappa Society

State Higher Education Executive Officers Association
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)
Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities
The Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors
WASC Senior College & University Commission (WSCUC)
Yes We Must Coalition