

Are Students More Tolerant of Different Points of View When Universities Adopt Statements of Free Expression and Institutional Neutrality?

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Can universities do anything to create an environment where students are more open to hearing points of view they disagree with?

Recent surveys show increasing student intolerance of different points of view on campus. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression's (FIRE's) 2026 annual survey of college campuses about free expression finds a majority of students unwilling to allow controversial speakers on campus, a majority believing it is at least rarely acceptable to shout down a speaker or block other students from attending a speech, and one-third believing it is at least rarely acceptable to use violence to prevent a campus speech. Other surveys, including our own, measure intolerance in other ways.

124 higher education institutions have adopted or endorsed statements of free expression, like the Chicago Statement. The Chicago Statement, which was adopted by the University of Chicago in 2014, articulates "the University's overarching commitment to free, robust, and uninhibited debate and deliberation among all members of the University's community."

Similarly, 51 universities have adopted statements of institutional neutrality, modeled after the University of Chicago's 1967 Kalven Report. These statements commit a university not to comment on social or political issues, arising "out of respect for free inquiry and the obligation to cherish a diversity of viewpoints."

While adopting statements of free expression and institutional neutrality is meant to signal expected behavior, understanding their influence can inspire educators and researchers to believe in practical solutions that can positively shape student attitudes toward free speech.

Four Takeaways from the Research

- **A robust negative relationship exists between adoption of an institutional neutrality statement and student intolerance.** We find that students at universities adopting an institutional neutrality statement are significantly less likely to favor withdrawing controversial speaker invitations, dropping readings and discussion topics that make students uncomfortable, and reporting other students who say something deemed offensive.
- **Adopting a statement of institutional neutrality seems to be more important than adopting a statement of free expression.** Although we find a negative relationship between adopting a statement of free expression and student intolerance, the effect goes away when we control for adoption of a statement of institutional neutrality.
- **Students at universities with stricter speech policies are significantly less tolerant of different points of view.** Our findings show a higher probability that students favor intolerant actions toward speech they disagree with at universities rated red and yellow in FIRE's Spotlight on Speech Codes, compared with those rated green. If adopting statements of free expression and institutional neutrality builds momentum for policy changes that better support free expression, it may also reduce student intolerance through this indirect route.
- **The associations are not necessarily causal, but they provide strong evidence that universities can improve campus speech climates by adopting statements of institutional neutrality.** Students who are more open to different points of view may be more attracted to universities that adopt these statements. However, given the recency of these statements (only 7 universities adopted institutional neutrality before 2024), the results are more consistent with student attitudes changing as a result of adopting institutional neutrality.

A new study by John Bitzan, Antonio Saravia, and Andrés Marroquín is the first to estimate the relationship between university statements of free expression and institutional neutrality and student tolerance for different points of view. We use data from five years of the Challey Institute's American College Student Freedom, Progress, and Flourishing Survey to estimate this relationship.

The results suggest that the intended signal of universities adopting statements of

institutional neutrality may effectively influence student attitudes toward free speech. By committing not to take positions on social and political issues, institutional neutrality statements are meant to signal the university's intent to create an environment open to debate, rather than closing debate by declaring one side correct. Our findings are consistent with the signal effectively reducing student intolerance toward controversial or unpopular views.

It also suggests that improving university speech policies to support free expression better may make students more open to different points of view. Thus, although statements of free expression are not significantly associated with student tolerance, if their adoption builds momentum to change speech policies, they may influence student tolerance indirectly.

In answering how universities can create an environment where more students are open to different points of view, our study suggests that adopting a statement of institutional neutrality may be a good first step.

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