

ENHANCING FREE SPEECH AT MSU

Sen. Mark Worden (worden@msu.edu)

MSU's Trustees have posted a **Statement on Free Speech***

- Key excerpts:
 - *“Fundamental to Michigan State University’s philosophy on campus dissent is a belief that the **rights guaranteed in the First and Fourteenth amendments of the Constitution must be protected.**”*
 - *“Each right of an individual places a reciprocal duty upon others: the **duty to permit the individual to exercise the right.**”*
 - *“Regulations shall respect the **free expression of ideas and shall encourage the competition of ideas from diverse perspectives.**”*
 - *“The robust exchange of ideas and perspectives can be indicative of a **healthy intellectual environment.**”*
 - ***It is impermissible for an individual or group to deny free expression to others who are engaged in peaceable discourse or dissent.**”*

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

Questions of potential interest University Council members

- Should MSU embody to the principles in its **Statement of Free Speech**?
- Who is responsible for safeguarding free speech on campus?
- Is there evidence of serious free-speech violations on campus?
 - If so, how did MSU respond?
- Have any external survey(s) assessed free speech at MSU?
 - If so, what did the survey(s) show?
- What is the public's perception of free speech at MSU?
 - Is that public perception helpful or damaging to MSU?
- What could be done to strengthen free speech at MSU?

Should MSU embody the principles in its **Statement of Free Speech**?

- Freedom of speech has long been considered a cornerstone of universities
- Evidence shows that university policies, culture increasingly restrict free speech
 - Damages the universities' reputations
 - Damages the education they provide their students
- Several US Congressional hearings have documented this trend
 - <https://edworkforce.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=403038>
 - <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/JU/JU10/20180927/108458/HHRG-115-JU10-Wstate-WoodP-20180927.pdf>
 - https://edworkforce.house.gov/uploadedfiles/3.29.23_owens_hewd_subcommittee_hearing_opening_statement.pdf

Is there evidence of serious free-speech violations on campus? *

- A nationally known invited speaker was shouted down by about 20 “protesters” in a large MSU auditorium (Oct, 2022).
- The student group that invited the speaker anticipated such problems and paid for MSU police to be present.
- The police eventually removed the “protesters” so the talk could resume.
- As attendees left the building, the “protesters” cursed them.

* <https://statenews.com/article/2022/10/turning-point-msu-hosts-candace-owens-protesters-condemn-her-ideologies>



Have any external survey(s) assessed free speech at MSU? *

- 2024 National College Free Speech Rankings
 - Conducted by **Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE)**
 - Survey of 55,000 currently enrolled students at 250 colleges/universities
 - Comprehensive comparison of student experiences of on-campus free speech
- MSU ranked in the bottom 36% nationally for free speech
- MSU ranked lowest of four large Michigan universities
 - MTU, UM, WSU, and MSU

* <https://rankings.thefire.org/rank/school/michigan-state-university>

What is the public's perception of free speech at MSU? *

- MSU was derided nationally for claiming that common words were offensive (March, 2023)
 - “Gift”
 - “Bunny”
 - “America”
 - “Christmas tree”



* <https://nypost.com/2023/03/30/gift-bunny-and-christmas-tree-are-offensive-words-on-campus/>

<https://www.thecollegefix.com/michigan-state-inclusive-language-guide-bunny-gift-america-are-offensive/>

What could be done to strengthen free speech at MSU?

- University Council (UC) could express support for free speech at MSU
- UC could encourage efforts to assess and strengthen free speech at MSU
 - Proposal: Independent, Ad-Hoc Committee to study free speech at MSU
 - Membership:
 - Small, grass-roots group of faculty, staff, and students
 - Qualifications: Participants should want to strengthen free speech at MSU
 - Mission:
 - Collect information relevant to free speech at MSU
 - Study best practices for strengthening free speech in academia
 - Identify potential opportunities to strengthen free speech at MSU
 - Submit final report to UC for its consideration and possible resolutions

Example 1 of possible UC free-speech resolution *

Whereas, MSU's Board of Trustees has posted a **Statement on Free Speech** stating that *“Fundamental to MSU's philosophy on campus dissent is a belief that the rights guaranteed in the First and Fourteenth amendments of the Constitution must be protected;”* and,

Whereas, *“The University has worked for decades to establish a community consensus on the scope of intellectually productive and constitutionally protected dissent, and to distinguish it from impermissible disruption;”* and,

Whereas, *“That consensus is embodied in several documents, which have received student, faculty, and administrative review and approval;”* therefore be it,

Resolved, That MSU's University Council supports the abovementioned MSU Board of Trustees' **Statement on Free Speech** and calls on the MSU administration, faculty, staff, and students to honor and enforce the passages and principles expressed therein.

* Text shown in quotes was excerpted from MSU Trustees **Statement on Free Speech**:

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

Example 2 of UC free-speech resolution *

Whereas, MSU's Board of Trustees has posted a **Statement on Free Speech** stating that *“Fundamental to MSU's philosophy on campus dissent is a belief that the rights guaranteed in the First and Fourteenth amendments of the Constitution must be protected;”* and,

Whereas, evidence exists that recent violations of the passages and principles in the abovementioned **Statement on Free Speech** have restricted free speech at MSU; and,

Whereas, an ongoing pattern of free-speech violations at MSU could potentially damage MSU's reputation and the quality of its students' education; therefore be it,

Resolved, That MSU's University Council (UC) supports constructive efforts to identify opportunities to strengthen free speech at MSU and report such opportunities to the UC.

* Text shown in quotes was excerpted from MSU Trustees **Statement on Free Speech**:

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

THANK YOU

Mark Worden
worden@msu.edu