

## **On Institutional Statements**

**August 12, 2024**

The modern university exists to serve the society of which it is a part. The University of Virginia is deeply aware of its role within American democracy, its complex history, and its ongoing mission to develop “responsible citizen leaders and professionals.” In recent years, many universities have construed their public role to include issuing official statements on questions that are of great moment to society but are external to their own operations. Pronouncing as an institution on external issues, however, can divert the university from its mission by compromising academic freedom and damaging the university’s public legitimacy.

*For these reasons, the University of Virginia should express no opinions about social and political questions except as those questions directly affect its mission or operations.*

At its core a university is a place of study, where knowledge is discovered, developed, improved, and disseminated without fear or favor. As an institution, a university is not an expert on the great issues of the day, but is rather a setting where expertise is earned, exercised, and challenged. Over the centuries universities have contributed to democratic society by being arenas of robust debate, by submitting even the most settled ideas to testing, and by practicing both intellectual humility about how much we know and confidence about how much we can know.

Institutional statements on issues that do not directly affect the university can be harmful in two ways. First, such statements can compromise the academic freedom that is essential to the university’s mission. The University of Virginia’s Statement on Free Expression and Free Inquiry (2021) declares, “All views, beliefs, and perspectives deserve to be articulated and heard free from interference.” That is “not because every idea is equally good,” but so that each “may be subjected to the rigorous scrutiny necessary to advance knowledge.” Any person, institution, or practice that can intimidate people into holding one opinion over another may threaten academic freedom. Such threats may come from the state, donors, or social pressure. They also may come from the university’s own leadership. The

extent to which institutional statements jeopardize academic freedom may vary according to circumstance, but the principle is straightforward: the university has leverage over its members and could chill dissent.

Second, statements about external issues can weaken the public's trust by making the university appear politically biased on issues about which there is broad disagreement in society. If it is to contribute to society, a university must enjoy the confidence not only of its own members and alumni but also of those whose lives and communities it affects, of their elected representatives, and of other institutions. A university that is educating its students well and producing pathbreaking research, but is not trusted, is falling short of its mission.

Refraining from official statements does not imply indifference or detachment from the wider world. The university's leaders ought to express empathy or sympathy for those in our community who are affected by external events and direct them to resources that can help them. Appendix B 2 Leaders should also publicize educational opportunities for those interested in learning more about particular external events.

Neither does refraining from official statements amount to partisanship concerning external questions or events – for example, favoring the more powerful actor in a conflict. Followed consistently over time, the principle of refraining from official statements will mitigate suspicions of bias.

Avoiding institutional pronouncements does not compromise the freedom of individuals or groups within the university to make public statements about external events. Indeed, such statements are essential to academic freedom and to the university's mission in society. University leaders who speak for themselves publicly on external issues should take care to distinguish such speech from official institutional pronouncements.

When the university does issue statements about its mission or operations, dissenters should not be punished so long as they continue to meet their responsibilities as employees or students.

The same problems that attend statements by the university attend statements by its official units, including schools, departments, centers, institutes, and programs. Pronouncements by a dean, department chair, or coach could likewise be taken by some to represent the unit as a whole. They also could potentially chill the speech or actions of faculty, students, or staff. Those who lead these units should consider adopting the principles enunciated here.

On critical issues of the day, it can be difficult for leaders to refrain from making statements on behalf of the university. But avoiding such statements is vital – not so that universities can be aloof from society, but precisely so that they might serve society as only they can.

### **Institutional Statements Committee**

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