

University of Richmond
Statement on Free Expression
December 2020

Institutional Mission

The University of Richmond is committed to the production and dissemination of knowledge through open inquiry and “the promotion of a vibrant intellectual community that encourages thoughtful disagreement and the vigorous exchange of ideas.”¹ The University believes that “respectful engagement with a broad diversity of perspectives and experiences [is] essential to intellectual growth,”² and that members of the University community can build understanding and empathy by engaging with different points of view. The University’s commitment to fostering a diverse, inclusive community demands an equally strong commitment to freedom of expression. The ability to speak freely, debate vigorously, and engage deeply with differing viewpoints is essential to the University’s mission of advancing knowledge and preparing students to flourish in a complex world. Freedom of expression enables the University community—students, faculty, and staff—to express their deeply held convictions, opinions, ideas, and matters of conscience and engage in vigorous debate, criticism, and counter-speech.

Rights of Free Expression

The University promotes and protects the freedom of expression for all members of its community. At the University of Richmond, speech may not be suppressed, nor speakers disinvited, simply because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the University community to be unwelcome or deeply offensive. The University recognizes that on occasion some members of the community may strongly disagree with the speech of others, or may view the expression of certain ideas as harmful. On these occasions, it is for the members of the University community to respond by openly and vigorously contesting the ideas that they oppose, not by seeking to suppress speech. The broad protection of freedom of expression is particularly necessary for speakers and messages that challenge authority or the status quo, which frequently have been the target of censorship efforts.

Limits of Free Expression

Freedom of expression at the University of Richmond is not without limits. The University may restrict expression that incites imminent lawless action, falsely defames a specific individual, or which targets a specific individual or individuals with threats or harassment. In addition, the University may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt classes, operations, or university-sponsored events. But these narrow exceptions must never be used in a manner that is inconsistent with the University’s foundational commitment to a completely free and open discussion of ideas.

¹ The University of Richmond’s Code of Organizational Ethics and Integrity, p.2 (Values of the University; Pursuit of Knowledge).

² The University of Richmond’s Code of Organizational Ethics and Integrity, p.2 (Values of the University; Inclusivity and Equity).

Rights of Non-Disruptive Protest

Freedom of expression necessarily includes the freedom to engage in non-disruptive counter-speech or protest. Members of the University community are free to contest ideas expressed on campus and to criticize speakers who have been invited to present their views. In so protesting, however, members of this community may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to invite speakers or engage in their own permitted acts of expression. The University of Richmond is committed not only to promoting the lively and fearless freedom of debate and deliberation, but also to protecting that freedom when others attempt to restrict it. It is an essential part of the University's educational mission to educate members of the University community about these fundamental principles, and to foster the community's ability to engage in debate and deliberation in an effective and responsible manner.

Rights of the University

Although committed to the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression, the University itself need not remain neutral in regard to ideas or beliefs expressed on campus. The University enjoys its own freedom to respond or communicate the institution's values and principles.