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March 29, 2025
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This House supports institutional neutrality.

An Open Letter to College and University Trustees and Regents: It's Time to Adopt Institutional Neutrality

Institutional Neutrality Org, February 7, 2024

The Academic Freedom Alliance, Heterodox Academy, and the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression are nonpartisan organizations dedicated to defending and advancing freedom of speech and open inquiry in higher education. We stand together in sending this entreaty to college and university trustees and regents across the country during this time of growing national concern about the fate and security of free thought on campuses.

It is time for those entrusted with ultimate oversight authority for your institutions to restore truth-seeking as the primary mission of higher education by adopting a policy of institutional neutrality on social and political issues that do not concern core academic matters or institutional operations.

In recent years, colleges and universities have increasingly weighed in on social and political issues. This has led our institutions of higher education to become politicized and has created an untenable situation whereby they are expected to weigh in on all social and political issues.

Most critically, these stances risk establishing an orthodox view on campus, threatening the pursuit of knowledge for which higher education exists.

As the University of Chicago's famous Kalven Report of 1967 states, a policy of institutional neutrality is premised on the defining mission of the university: to pursue truth through "the discovery, improvement, and dissemination of knowledge." And to accomplish this mission, "a university must sustain an extraordinary environment of freedom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures."

Furthermore, the report recognizes, "There is no mechanism by which [the university] can reach a collective position without inhibiting that full freedom of dissent on which it thrives." In short, individual faculty members and students are the "instrument of dissent and criticism." The university, on the other hand, "is the home and sponsor of critics."

Where to draw the line between institutional neutrality and position-taking is a matter of careful prudential judgment. But, as the Kalven Report notes, there should be "a heavy presumption against the university taking collective action or expressing opinions on the political and social issues of the day." Smart observers will recognize good faith efforts to apply this principle.

A useful maxim to guide decision makers is "if an academic institution is not required to adopt a position in order to fulfill its mission of intellectual freedom or operational capacity, it is required not to adopt a position." (See, e.g., Princeton Principles for a Campus Culture of Free Inquiry.)

For a neutrality principle to work, it must be publicly announced and adhered to on a consistent and faithful basis. Making an exception inexorably leads to pressure to make others and to allegations of bias.

Critically, institutional neutrality applies only to leaders and units of the institution. This is true not only for the central administration, but also for the units of the university, such as schools, departments, centers, and programs. It does not apply to faculty members and students (i.e., the "critics"), either individually or as members of voluntary, non-institutional associations.

Given the need to prepare for the execution of an institutional neutrality policy, we call on you, the trustees and regents of America's colleges and universities, to publicly adopt such a policy by the beginning of the 2024-25 academic year.

We and the nation are watching campus events with keen interest and would applaud this fulfillment of your fiduciary duty.

ANALYSIS: What would institutional neutrality mean for Yale?

Yale Daily News, JOSIE REICH, SEP 23, 2024

As a faculty committee considers whether Yale should take positions on issues of public importance, a debate has ignited within the Yale community.

Earlier this month, University President Maurie McInnis convened a committee of seven professors to consider the extent to which Yale as an institution should comment on current events.

The announcement came on the heels of a flurry of related news at peer universities. The University of Pennsylvania's interim president announced a move toward institutional neutrality just hours before McInnis' email, and Columbia, the University of Michigan and the University of Connecticut have begun consideration in the weeks since. Barnard and the University of Virginia, among other schools, have adopted neutrality policies this month.

A far-from-settled debate has unfolded on Yale's campus since McInnis' announcement. Between the committee's listening sessions, a faculty panel discussion and opinion pieces in the News, community members have weighed in on what

institutional neutrality would mean for Yale.
The News breaks down lingering questions about the policy and its effects.

What is institutional voice and neutrality?

Institutional neutrality is the prevailing label for the policy of some institutions to refrain from taking stances on current events unrelated to their work.
Yale's committee is officially titled "the Committee on Institutional Voice," and the word "neutrality" is absent from McInnis's initial email to the Yale community announcing her consideration of the policy. Rather, McInnis wrote that her mandate for the group of professors was to consider "when Yale, as an institution, speaks on issues of the day."
At listening sessions with the Yale community, committee members have also noted that Yale is not using the word neutrality to frame the issue and that they are instead opting to analyze the institution's "voice."
The committee co-chairs have noted that the word "neutrality" can be polarizing because some disagree with the notion that institutions of higher education, which make investments and note humanitarian values in their mission statements, can be neutral.
"It's not possible for an institution that has this much power and money … to not take political positions," co-Chair Cristina Rodríguez '95 LAW '00 said to students at a listening session.
The concept of institutional neutrality started in a 1967 Kalven Report, drafted by a faculty committee at the University of Chicago, which argues that "neutrality as an institution has its complement in the fullest freedom for its faculty and students as individuals to participate in political action and social protest."
As institutional neutrality policy has spread, universities have adopted varying versions of the idea. Some schools, including Vanderbilt University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, use the direct language of institutional neutrality as derived from the Kalven Report. Others, including Harvard University, announced their new policies under the same "institutional voice" phrasing as Yale is using.
Sterling Professor of Philosophy Michael Della Rocca, the other committee co-chair, said at a listening session for students that the committee's recommendations will be independent and original of other institutions' decisions.
"We're not going to be following what other schools do," Della Rocca said. "The president will do what's best for Yale."

Arguments for and against

Across the listening sessions, faculty panel discussion and in interviews with the News, Yale community members have expressed a wide range of reasons why they support or oppose neutrality.
Proponents argue that the policy creates an open-minded atmosphere on campus that promotes the exchange of diverse opinions. Some say that issuing statements gives the University president and senior leadership an outsized megaphone to express their beliefs.
Another common argument is that the University's taking stances can isolate community members who disagree with the statements. Others note that it is impossible to release statements on every important issue locally and globally and that without action following the statements, words are empty.
On the other hand, adversaries argue that Yale has a duty to defend humanitarian values, and some say that they would feel more supported in their identities if the University addresses contentious topics.
Others have noted that some Yale statements have indeed been followed by new policy initiatives, such as the re-examination of the Yale Police Department after the killing of George Floyd in 2020 and the new diversity efforts after the Supreme Court overturned affirmative action.
Yet both students and committee members have questioned how to determine what current events relate to Yale.
Some statements tread a careful line, such as the one that was issued in June 2020 by former University President Peter Salovey after the Supreme Court blocked the Trump administration's attempt to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. Salovey wrote that he was "relieved" on behalf of "Yale students and graduates covered under DACA." But he also wrote, more broadly, that "we still need legislation that provides a pathway to legal status."
Other instances are clearer. Under institutional neutrality, Yale would likely still have made statements on Title IX regulations and affirmative action, for example.
But the policy would complicate the issuing of statements on important news that does not directly concern universities, such as the overturning of Roe v. Wade, the invasion of Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas war and the killing of George Floyd.

What the committee is considering

The exact bounds of what the committee will address in their recommendations are unclear.
At listening sessions, students asked whether a policy of neutrality would only apply to the president or whether other administrators such as deans, departmental chairs and heads of college would be affected as well. The co-chairs said that this is one aspect of the recommendations that they are considering.
The co-chairs stated at sessions that they are not making any decisions regarding Yale's investment policies. McInnis' initial email also emphasized that the committee is not re-examining Yale's free expression policies for individuals.
"The objective is to try to complete the work by October or November," Rodríguez said about a timeline for providing the recommendations.
The committee's listening sessions will continue through Oct. 2.
Josie Reich covers the president's office. She previously reported on admissions and financial aid. Originally from

Washington, DC, she is a junior in Davenport College majoring in American Studies.

Salovey criticizes institutional neutrality, calls for university leaders to speak out

Yale Daily News, JOSIE REICH, NOV 21, 2024

In an essay, the former University president argued that university communities should know their presidents' beliefs about significant world issues.

Former University President Peter Salovey penned an essay arguing that university presidents and other leaders should speak out on matters of public importance. The move contrasts University President Maurie McInnis, who last month advised Yale administrators to refrain from such comments.

Salovey wrote that as president of Yale, he wanted to be a thought leader for the country. If university leaders do not share opinions, he argued, leaders in other sectors such as politicians and corporate CEOs will have outsized power to shape local, national and international debates.

"I am concerned that not speaking on contemporary world affairs is an abdication of leadership responsibilities," he wrote in the essay in Elsevier, a science publisher. "I wanted the university community to know what its president believes. But this is increasingly becoming an unpopular view, superseded by the principle of institutional neutrality."

Salovey wrote to the News that he met with the Yale committee that recommended restraining institutional voice while they were deliberating, and shared similar views to those in his Elsevier essay. He added that he submitted the essay to Elsevier "well before" Yale's report was released. He declined to immediately speak further.

Near the end of his presidency, Salovey told the News that he would like to see a committee consider institutional neutrality under his successor, but that he leaned toward believing Yale should preserve its ability to speak.

"He is voicing his views as a member of Yale's faculty, and I welcome open dialogue from all members of our community," McInnis wrote to the News about Salovey's essay. "I accepted the recommendations and report of the Committee on Institutional Voice and that has not changed."

Throughout the essay, Salovey makes a point to not mention Yale's committee report or McInnis. For example, in one section, he mentions that the new guidelines of many universities apply not just to the president. To illustrate this point, he chooses the example of Harvard's new report, even though Yale's guidelines also apply to administrators other than the president.

Earlier this week, declining to comment for a different article, Salovey wrote that he was "trying to keep a low profile."

Salovey spent the first half of the essay musing on the Woodward Report — the seminal report that has defined free expression at Yale for the past 50 years — and weighing the balance between free expression and social harmony on campuses.

Pivoting to how free expression applies to university leaders, he worried that presidents remaining silent on issues of public significance would render universities irrelevant and reduce public trust in higher education. He also disputed the idea that institutional speech would have a chilling effect on debates on college campuses, an assertion made in the report of Yale's Committee on Institutional Voice.

He wrote that he appreciated when faculty, staff, students and alumni disagreed with him when he would comment as president. He found that his public comments encouraged dialogue, even though his statements were often "parsed word-by-word by the campus community and the media, often leading to days of controversy and little clarity."

"Quite frankly, I doubt I intimidated anyone into silence; it seemed to be just the opposite," he wrote. "I believe the philosophical case for institutional neutrality is overdone."

Although Yale's new guidance supports leaders speaking about issues that pertain to the University, Salovey wrote that it is not always clear what falls in that category. He noted that he would want to speak about world events such as book-burnings or President-elect Donald Trump's Muslim ban, which he characterized as connected to the realm of education.

Salovey added that university webpages should not be places to post political statements. Instead, he urged universities to provide other forums for discussion about important issues and also stressed the importance of attribution and personal ownership of opinions in such forums.

McInnis adopted the report of the Committee on Institutional Voice on Oct. 30.

Josie Reich covers the president's office. She previously reported on admissions and financial aid. Originally from Washington, DC, she is a junior in Davenport College majoring in American Studies.

More Universities Are Choosing to Stay Neutral on the Biggest Issues

The New York Times, By Vimal Patel, March 11, 2025

Instead of speaking out on the hot-button debates of the day, more schools are making it a policy to stay silent as political pressure mounts against higher education.

Just a few years ago, university statements on the day's social and political issues abounded.

When Russia attacked Ukraine in 2022, Harvard's president at the time called it "senseless" and "deplorable," and flew the invaded country's flag in Harvard Yard. After George Floyd died under the knee of a white police officer, Cornell's president said she was "sickened." The University of Michigan's president described the Oct. 7, 2023, violence against Israel as a "horrific attack by Hamas terrorists."

But over the last year, each of those universities has adopted policies that limit official statements on current issues.

According to a new report released on Tuesday from the Heterodox Academy, a group that has been critical of progressive orthodoxy on college campuses, 148 colleges had adopted "institutional neutrality" policies by the end of 2024, a trend that underscores the scorching political scrutiny they are under. All but eight of those policies were adopted after the Hamas attack.

"We must open the way for our individual faculty's expertise, intelligence, scholarship and wisdom to inform our state and society in their own voice, free from institutional interference," said Mark Bernstein, a regent at Michigan, after adopting the policy in October.

He said the university had historically refrained from issuing statements on momentous events, like the assassinations of Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy or during the two world wars.

"So institutional statements are a modern phenomenon and a misguided venture that betrays our public mission," he said.

The universities are adopting such policies at a time when the Trump administration has moved aggressively to punish them for not doing enough to crack down on antisemitism and for embracing diversity, equity and inclusion policies.

On Friday, the administration announced that it was pulling $400 million from Columbia, a move that sent shock waves across higher education. The administration has already said it is looking to target other universities.

Universities ramped up issuing statements on hot-button issues about a decade ago, after the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and the police shootings of Black people in places like Ferguson, Mo., said Alex Arnold, director of research at the Heterodox Academy.

Some conservatives had long lamented such statements and believed they veered too leftward. Speech groups like the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression worried that they discouraged dissent. For a while, the statements were hardly the subject of widespread controversy.

The Hamas attack and the war that followed changed the equation.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has always split the left, but the attack on Oct. 7 and the war that followed sharpened those divisions. The statements that universities issued on the attack and Israel's bombing of Gaza came under scrutiny, and were often criticized for being too late, too weak, too biased — or all three.

University leaders, under pressure from donors, lawmakers and the public, began to ask: Why put out statements at all?

About four out of five colleges that adopted neutrality policies are public and face scrutiny from state lawmakers. Several states, including Texas and Utah and North Carolina, forced their public universities to adopt such policies. Others, like Tennessee, are considering it.

Most of the new policies apply to senior administrators, like college presidents and provosts. Others also encompass units like academic departments. And many apply to faculty members when they are speaking in an official capacity, but often make clear that faculty are free to express personal views, according to the Heterodox Academy.

"The whole experience of coping with the campus controversy triggered by the Hamas attack has really gotten institutional leaders to think carefully and to reflect on what the function of our institutions of higher education is," Mr. Arnold said. "I do think this is probably going to be a pretty durable change."

Critics of the neutrality trend have argued that administrators are merely sidestepping difficult debates on the Middle East conflict, and scared of angering donors and lawmakers.

After Clark University, in Massachusetts, said it would shy away from taking positions, the school newspaper's opinion editor called the move a "fake policy" designed to curb discussion of the conflict.

But even universities that adopted such a policy have not gone totally silent on contested political issues.

At an Anti-Defamation League event in New York City last week, Michigan's president, Santa Ono, called the effort to boycott, divest and sanction Israel antisemitic, and said his response had been to invest even more in those partnerships.

In an email, the university said the new neutrality policy adopted a "heavy presumption" against issuing statements "not directly connected to internal university functions."

"Combating antisemitism and making sure we have an environment where all students can thrive and succeed is part of our moral and legal obligation, and absolutely connected to our internal functions as an institution of higher education," said Colleen Mastony, a Michigan spokeswoman.

Presidents are often stumbling over their new policies. During an October interview with the school newspaper, Harvard's president, Alan Garber, called a statement by pro-Palestinian students "offensive," prompting the editorial board to tell him to "follow your own policy."

Last month, the American Association of University Professors, a faculty rights group, issued a statement on neutrality that was, more or less, neutral. It stated that the idea "is neither a necessary condition for academic freedom nor categorically incompatible with it."

The re-election of Donald Trump is now testing those policies.

As the new administration, which has described universities as "the enemy," ratchets up its attack on higher education, colleges are under greater pressure to be voices of resistance.

But many college presidents have been spooked into silence, said Patricia McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University, a small Catholic institution three miles from the White House.

"They look at what happened to Claudine Gay, and some of the other presidents," she said, referring to the former Harvard president who resigned last year after a congressional hearing on antisemitism. "And they're like: 'I don't want that to happen to me. So I'll just shut up and hunker down, and hope this cloud passes.'"

No university is more associated with neutrality than the University of Chicago, where incoming students are furnished with the Kalven Report, the 1967 document that made the case for neutrality. The report, penned as violence upended college campuses during the Vietnam War, said the university "is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic."
Tom Ginsburg, director of the Forum for Free Inquiry and Expression at Chicago, says adopting neutrality signals to lawmakers that colleges are committed to welcoming diverse viewpoints.
"Because the statements tended to reflect the majority views on campuses, which are overwhelmingly left-leaning," he said, "you can see how adopting it would be a way of saying to lawmakers: 'This isn't who we really are. We're not indoctrinating people with contested positions.'"
But even the Kalven Report included a caveat that doesn't settle precisely when universities should issue statements. Neutrality, the report says, still allows colleges to speak out when "the very mission of the university and its values of free inquiry" are threatened.
That moment is now, said Ms. McGuire of Trinity Washington University. "The erosion of knowledge and expertise that this administration has embraced is very, very scary," she said, "and higher ed should be calling it out at every turn."
Vimal Patel writes about higher education with a focus on speech and campus culture. More about Vimal Patel

THE INSTITUTIONAL NEUTRALITY TRAP

LPE Blog, by AMY KAPCZYNSKI, Downloaded March 12, 2025

Amy Kapczynski (@akapczynski) is Professor of Law at Yale Law School and a cofounder of the LPE Blog.
This fall, Yale's new President Maurie McInnis convened a faculty committee to make recommendations on the use of "institutional voice." The committee was charged to deliver a policy by the end of October. This is lightning speed for a committee like this, and the deadline seemed conveniently timed with the election, as if part of the point was to find reasons to stay silent in a time of political turmoil. And stay silent Yale's leaders did, as almost all university Presidents have in the aftermath of Trump's return to power. This despite the fact that the incoming administration poses extraordinary new threats to higher education.
There's a lot to unpack here: the problem with so-called "institutional neutrality," the subtleties in our committee's recommendations (lost on those who claimed, wrongly but predictably, that Yale has adopted a position of institutional neutrality), and the implications of all of this for the future of higher ed. The example also provides a useful moment to reflect on what we can expect of powerful institutions in the second Trump era, and what that means for the rest of us.
First, what's wrong with institutional neutrality? As Dan HoSang and I explained in an op-ed in the Yale Daily News, the push for neutrality is a key piece of a broader conservative campaign to suppress speech on campus that conservatives don't like. That campaign has led to nearly 100 new bills around the country directly targeting higher education, many of which seek to curb speech on campus, particularly about race and gender. It is one part of a larger, well-funded attempt to take over what conservatives see as an important locus of progressive power.
Neutrality rules are commonly defended as a means to protect faculty and student speech. The purported idea is that when the university makes a statement on issues of the day – about the war in Ukraine, or the Supreme Court's SFAA affirmative action decision, for example – it chills the speech of those who teach and learn on campus, who will fear retaliation for expressing contrary views.
But this is nonsense. We want our leaders to speak in defense of our institutional values, in part because collective voice carries different import than individual voice. That's why, for instance, Yale recently sent an institutional representative to Hartford to testify against a proposed state law banning legacy preferences in admission. I disagree deeply with the university's position on the law, but the problem isn't that Yale took a position. And nothing about it doing so prevented me from stating my contrary view – nor did it deter our students, several of whom went to Hartford to testify against Yale's position. (If there's a procedural problem here, it's that universities like Yale don't really have a good means to ensure that they're really speaking for the collective, or in response to our values. Instead, our leaders more and more seem to speak in the interests of the trustees, or the all-powerful endowment, even where these are at odds with our mission.)
Unless our leaders are acting in retaliatory ways, statements themselves aren't going to chill faculty or student speech. What does chill speech are rules against speaking — rules like those narrowing the use of institutional voice. Those rules, which come with an implicit promise to punish, create a new weapon for those who don't like the content of university speech: the argument that the speech is not just substantively wrong or misguided, but that it's breaking the rule. This is why people who want neutrality rules don't think they should be limited to university presidents or other top officials. They argue that these rules should also apply to deans, department chairs, academic centers and – a colleague recently reported to me – law school clinics. You heard it here first, folks: expect that we'll now see arguments that clinics should stop any kind of public interest work that might make a "statement." This, of course, would be a direct violation of the academic freedom to teach, while also undermining important ways that our professional schools serve the public.
We should also expect that only some kinds of speech will be targeted as political. Here at Yale, we had a striking recent example of this. The student-run Women's Center offered to co-sponsor a panel on Palestine. Other students, as well as an off-campus conservative group, objected. When we returned to campus this fall, the administration instructed the Center to "maintain broad neutrality" in its programming. What could that possibly mean? Do centers for religious life have to provide programs for atheists? Places like Women's Centers – and the university itself – can never be "neutral" in a generic sense precisely because they have missions to advance.

Thankfully, the directive to the Women's Center was rescinded. And our committee on institutional voice itself recognized that "neutrality" rules make no sense for universities. We cannot be neutral as to matters that affect our mission. We can't be for calculus, and also against it, or for vaccine science, and against it. Instead, we – and our leaders – must speak, and act, in defense of our mission and disciplinary work. Yale's mission is broad and includes "improving the world," including through practice. Protecting it requires both speech and action. As we noted in our op-ed:

Institutional voice is not simply a problem. It is essential to the pursuit of the mission of the university. To be faithful to the breadth of our mission requires, among other things, active work in the world, including protecting academic values, but also educating and influencing practice. Limiting institutional voice to a narrow set of issues concerning the legislative or policy interests of the university — admissions policy or taxes on the endowment — betrays our shared obligation to advance this mission in practice. Consider the professional schools, for example. They study and speak about vaccines to support better public health and study and speak about the Constitution to defend a democratic form of government. Sometimes our leaders might even speak on these matters; for example against laws that threaten free speech everywhere, or against a proposed FDA commissioner who is anti-vaccine. So it should be, particularly in perilous times….

Instead of rules or guidelines against university speech, we should recognize that institutional voice can be important to achieving the university's mission — and encourage leaders to speak when our mission is threatened. We should be clear that there are bad reasons not to speak — for example, for fear of angering donors or politicians. We should urge our leaders to use good judgment and not cheapen the impact of statements by making them all the time, or always running them through PR professionals. We should recognize, finally, that silencing our leaders creates risks to the university mission, including free speech on campus.

Importantly, Yale's new policy is stated in prudential terms, and not absolutes. And in this respect it is better than the neutrality rules produced elsewhere. While it does too much to encourage silence, it also makes clear that "the decision whether to issue statements should remain a matter of judgment." Consistent with that, our President has told faculty that these are not rules, but recommendations, and will not result in sanctions. This is far better than the alternative, though still too broadly casts forms of collective speech as problematic.

What does all this imply for the future of higher ed? Institutional voice rules are dangerous, and even prudential versions like ours, I fear, will be used by leaders to avoid defending the mission of the university today, even where it is very explicitly at stake. While that defense isn't done only through public statements, effective leaders sometimes have to make such statements, because speech is part of how we communicate to one another what is at stake in the world around us.

When I was researching this issue, I went back to read some of the statements of Kingman Brewster, the President of Yale at a time when universities were in far more turmoil than even today, and who is widely celebrated for how he navigated these crises. If you have a moment, read the statement he released during the most volatile occasion in his tenure, on the eve of the trial in New Haven of nine members of the Black Panthers for murder. In it, he declares: "On the fundamental matter of the fact and feeling of justice in our own community, Yale cannot be neutral," and that "whatever we do, none of us should be neutral in his commitment to a continuance of the struggle for decency and justice for all people." He also said that he was "skeptical of the ability of black revolutionaries to achieve a fair trial anywhere in the United States." The statement inspired tremendous backlash – including a speech by Vice President Spiro Agnew calling for his ouster. But Brewster did not resign. Instead, he defended the right of students and protestors from around the country to gather on campus at a tense but remarkably peaceful May Day rally.

Brewster was hardly himself a revolutionary. Yet it's almost impossible to imagine a university President speaking with such conviction and clarity today. That's not something to celebrate, even if it isn't terribly surprising. The voices we need on campus will have to come from the rest of us. They'll be stronger if they speak for a collective that also has the power to act on them. That's why on our campus we've recently formed an AAUP chapter. I encourage all of you who can to start, or join, your own.

There's a broader lesson here too. In this era of authoritarian threat, leaders of many of our institutions are going to see every reason to keep their heads down – even if that means abandoning smaller and weaker people and institutions to the wolves. The rest of us need to make our own collectives, cultivating the strength and conviction that comes from solidarity, allowing us to be brave in the face of risk. We're going to need them.

The Need For Institutional Neutrality At Universities

Forbes, By Daniel Diermeier, Dec 20, 2023

Contributor. I write about higher education, innovation and civil discourse.

When you look beyond the flashpoint moments that garnered the most headlines, a question at the heart of the recent congressional hearing that cost the University of Pennsylvania president her job was how universities and their leaders should create and foster an environment for the free exploration and discussion of ideas.

Even a few years ago, it would have been strange to call for universities to be protectors of free expression, open inquiry, and wide-ranging debate. Universities are, by design, where we come to debate and probe the questions that matter to us most. And our explorations are richest and most fruitful when they are informed by a wide range of viewpoints.

Free speech and open inquiry on college campuses are based on three principles. One is the principle of open forums—a university's commitment to providing plenty of spaces where issues can be explored and discussed without the threat of censorship.

The second principle is civil discourse—an equally strong commitment to facilitating constructive conversation and debate among people of differing viewpoints, characterized by basic respect, a willingness to listen and be persuaded by the better argument, and a resistance to rushing to moral condemnation of opponents.

The third principle—institutional neutrality—is perhaps the least understood. But it is no less essential to a university's ability to serve its purpose.

The concept is straightforward: Institutional neutrality is the commitment of a university and its leaders to refrain from taking public positions on controversial issues unless the issue directly affects the core mission and functioning of the university. It is critical to point out here that the principle of neutrality only applies to universities and their leaders, speaking in official capacity—not to students or faculty.

In explaining institutional neutrality and why it's important, most proponents point back to the language of the 1967 Kalven Report from the University of Chicago—and with good reason. All these decades later, no one has surpassed the report's authors in articulating the fundamental rationale for neutrality.

At the report's heart is the assertion that neutrality is necessary for maintaining the conditions most conducive to a university's purpose of providing transformative education and pathbreaking research. Crucially, the report points out that universities and their leaders risk stifling debate—the lifeblood of education and research—when they stake out official positions.

"There is no mechanism by which it can reach a collective position," the report's authors observe ("it" meaning a university), "without inhibiting that full freedom of dissent on which it thrives. It cannot insist that all of its members favor a given view of social policy; if it takes collective action, therefore, it does so at the price of censuring any minority who do not agree with the view adopted." When universities don't have a duty to speak, they have a duty to be silent.

Because when university leaders weigh in on an issue, they define an official position. By declaring which point of view is correct, a university's leader risks stopping genuine debate cold. The Kalven Report's argument is tough to beat for anyone who believes in the vital role universities play and how intellectual diversity and free-ranging debate are essential to it.

Some universities have adopted the University of Chicago's approach for themselves. Vanderbilt University, where I serve as chancellor, has a long-standing commitment to institutional neutrality. Alexander Heard, the university's chancellor during the tumult of the 1960s and early 1970s, explained why: "The social values of open forum and free inquiry cannot be realized without the political neutrality of the university as an institution, except where the university itself is the issue." Chancellor Heard knew that the purpose of a university is to encourage debate, not to settle it.

Yet amid today's polarized politics, many universities have given up on neutrality. Their leaders, speaking on behalf of their university communities, routinely declare positions on a wide range of social and political issues that are not directly connected to their missions.

I understand the impulse. University leaders are under immense pressure to take a stand on the issues of the day. Members of a university community want their alma mater to reflect their values, and they want to know that the leader of their institution is on their side. Their argument is that to not take a stand is, in effect, morally wrong or cowardly. The Kalven Report, composed in an era no less discordant than our own, has something to say here, too: "The neutrality of the university as an institution arises then not from a lack of courage nor out of indifference and insensitivity. It arises out of respect for free inquiry."

A university's paramount mission is to provide an environment for transformative education and pathbreaking research. When it takes any position and sends a signal that one point of view is preferable over another—no matter how noble and well-intentioned the underlying issue—it creates a climate inconsistent with its purpose.

Critics of neutrality often argue that it is a charade. After all, we are all political beings, with our own points of view, rooting for our side to prevail. Why pretend otherwise? Or as the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah asked in an April ideas piece for The Atlantic, "Why shouldn't we all just put our cards on the table and be open about what's in our hearts?"

Appiah makes the case that striving for neutrality—by the likes of judges and journalists, in addition to university leaders—is valuable in spite of our biases, because it assures "members of an eclectic community that all will be treated with respect." For Appiah, neutrality on a college campus reflects the neutrality of the liberal state, which values pluralism and equal standing under the law. Neutrality doesn't deny the fighting—for power, for mindshare, for justice—going on beneath the surface. But "it keeps the fighting fair."

For a university to do its job, the "fighting" that occurs within academia—the never-ending battle of ideas and evidence, the persistent critiques of conventional wisdom, the constant exhortation to students to think critically—is indispensable. And by preserving a neutral arena for its work, a university also performs the service of preserving it for society, in which such spaces are continually threatened.

In this sense, universities are like judges, whose job is to ensure that a jury trial is conducted fairly. Even if the judges, deep in their hearts, favor one side over the other, their duty is to put their preference aside and uphold due process. Like judges, universities don't always get it right. And when they deviate from the governing principle of fairness, they need to be criticized and held accountable. But to encourage a judge to set aside any pretense of fairness and take a side would destroy the rule of law—just as a university leader taking sides undermines the university by undermining its core mission.

New AAUP Statement on Institutional Neutrality

American Association of University Professors, February 12, 2025

Today, the AAUP released the new statement On Institutional Neutrality, which reaffirms that institutional neutrality is neither a necessary condition for academic freedom nor categorically incompatible with it. The statement explores the history of the concept of institutional neutrality and the interpretation of the University of Chicago's 1967 Kalven Report, produced as protests swept campuses nationwide over the Vietnam War and long cited as the authoritative work on institutional neutrality.

"A commitment to neutrality," the new statement declares, "is not some magic wand that conjures freedom. Calls for neutrality instead provide an opportunity to consider how various practices of an institution—not only its speech or silence but also its actions and policies—might promote a more robust freedom of teaching, research, and intramural and extramural speech."

The statement calls for principles of academic freedom and shared governance to be chief considerations in the issuing of institutional and departmental statements as well as decisions on financial investments and campus protest policies.

As the statement's conclusion notes, "A university's decision to speak, or not; to limit its departments or other units from speaking; to divest from investments that conflict with its mission; or to limit protest in order to promote other forms of speech are all choices that might either promote or inhibit academic freedom and thus must be made with an eye to those practical results, not to some empty conception of neutrality. The defense of academic freedom has never been a neutral act."

In the context of the second Trump administration's numerous assaults on academic freedom in higher education, the AAUP urges universities, whose educational mission is to serve the public good, not to hide behind the pretense of remaining neutral.

Vanderbilt's Bold Stand for 'Neutrality'

The Wall Street Journal, By Lamar Alexander, May 15, 2023

Chancellor Daniel Diermeier declines to take official positions on issues like abortion, prompting outrage from some faculty.

When the Supreme Court overruled Roe v. Wade, the University of California's president denounced the decision as "antithetical" to UC's values. Vanderbilt University's new chancellor took a different approach. Daniel Diermeier, who was appointed in 2020, reaffirmed Vanderbilt's commitment to "principled neutrality," in which the college and its leadership refrain from taking positions on controversial issues that don't directly relate to the function of the university.

If "principled neutrality" sounds anodyne, you haven't been paying attention. Mr. Diermeier's stand is boldly reassuring. That his policies are an exception among elite universities isn't.

Even within Vanderbilt, Mr. Diermeier's stance is under attack. "Many of us—faculty, students, staff and alumni—are ready for a divorce from the chancellor's position," Brian L. Heuser, a Vanderbilt professor, argued in an Inside Higher Ed column. Mr. Heuser wants the university to take a stand against the Tennessee Legislature's votes on a variety of issues.

Mr. Diermeier's commitment—as well as the university's embrace of free expression on campus—is a legacy from the time when I was a student at Vanderbilt. In the 1960s, the university was being pummeled from the left and right for hosting controversial speakers like Allen Ginsberg, Stokely Carmichael and Strom Thurmond. Chancellor Alexander Heard said at the time: "A university's obligation is not to protect students from ideas, but rather expose them to ideas, to help make them capable of handling and, hopefully, having ideas." Vanderbilt doesn't take positions on abortion, guns or climate change, but it will ensure that on its campus you are free to state your position and hear others' viewpoints.

Principled neutrality isn't enough to prepare students to be good and thoughtful citizens. Too many are "taking cues from the polarized culture around them," Mr. Diermeier says—they're declaring that those with opposing views aren't merely incorrect but immoral. Such "moral tribalism" and a culture of condemnation has severely impeded the free exchange of ideas that is higher education's lifeblood.

Colleges today, Mr. Diermeier believes, must teach students how to debate constructively and "avoid the us-vs.-them dynamic that can lead to a breakdown in discourse."

To address that problem at Vanderbilt, former Republican Gov. Bill Haslam, historian Jon Meacham and faculty member Samar Ali lead students in the Vanderbilt Project on Unity and Democracy—a new program based in the College of Arts and Science that promotes research and discussion on evidence-based solutions to mediate differences.

There has been an erosion of confidence in and support for American higher education because many campuses aren't providing open forums. They take institutional positions on controversial issues and don't teach students how to talk with one another in a way that allows understanding and cooperation.

Other universities might consider Vanderbilt's example. At the moment, too many students have only two options: Join a perpetual shouting match or withdraw to a safe space. The next generation deserves a better choice.

Mr. Alexander has served as president of the University of Tennessee (1988-91), U.S. education secretary (1991-93) and a U.S. senator from Tennessee (2003-21).