



October 23, 2015

The Honorable Nikki R. Haley
Office of the Governor
1205 Pendleton Street
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Sent via U.S. Mail and Electronic Mail (governor@govoepp.state.sc.us)

Dear Governor Haley,

My name is Will Creeley. I am the Vice President of Legal and Public Advocacy for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to defending the core constitutional rights of students and faculty members at our nation's colleges and universities. Our website, thefire.org, will provide you with a greater sense of our identity and activities.

I write you today to express FIRE's concern about the policies restricting student and faculty speech maintained by South Carolina's public colleges and universities, and to offer our assistance in remedying the constitutional problems they present.

Like public institutions of higher learning nationwide, South Carolina's colleges and universities are legally required to honor the First Amendment rights of their students and faculty members. Indeed, it has long been settled law that the First Amendment is fully binding on public university campuses. *See, e.g., Widmar v. Vincent*, 454 U.S. 263, 268–69 (1981) (“With respect to persons entitled to be there, our cases leave no doubt that the First Amendment rights of speech and association extend to the campuses of state universities.”).

Accordingly, campus speech codes—university regulations prohibiting expression that would be constitutionally protected in society at large—have been consistently struck down on First Amendment grounds by federal and state courts in a virtually unbroken series of decisions dating back more than 25 years.¹ These courtroom defeats demonstrate

¹ *See McCauley v. University of the Virgin Islands*, 618 F.3d 232 (3d Cir. 2010); *DeJohn v. Temple University*, 537 F.3d 301 (3d Cir. 2008); *Dambrot v. Central Michigan University*, 55 F.3d 1177 (6th Cir. 1995); *University of Cincinnati Chapter of Young Americans for Liberty v. Williams*, 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 80967 (S.D. Ohio Jun. 12, 2012); *Smith v. Tarrant County College District*, 694 F. Supp. 2d 610 (N.D. Tex. 2010); *College Republicans at San Francisco State University v. Reed*, 523 F. Supp. 2d 1005 (N.D. Cal. 2007); *Roberts v. Haragan*, 346 F.

conclusively that the First Amendment does not tolerate the threat of censorship on campus.

But despite the unanimity of this precedent, research conducted by FIRE attorneys indicates that a majority of public colleges and universities nevertheless maintain policies that threaten First Amendment rights. For example, in 2014, FIRE reviewed policies governing student and faculty expression at 333 public institutions. Shockingly, 54.1% of the colleges and universities surveyed maintained at least one policy that substantially restricts freedom of speech. Disappointingly, at least three public institutions in South Carolina are among them, as indicated on our website at thefire.org/spotlight.

I trust that you will find this result as unacceptable as we do. Freedom of speech on campus is of critical importance to the continued vitality of our democracy. As the Supreme Court of the United States recognized in *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*, 354 U.S. 234, 250 (1957): “The essentiality of freedom in the community of American universities is almost self-evident. ... To impose any strait jacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our Nation.”

FIRE is far from alone in our concern for the expressive rights of students and faculty at our public colleges and universities. This past August, Representative Bob Goodlatte, Chairman of the U.S. House Judiciary Committee, sent letters to the presidents of 161 public colleges and universities across the country whose policies earned a “red light” rating from FIRE, indicating that they clearly and substantially restrict freedom of expression on campus. In his letter, Chairman Goodlatte asked each recipient “what steps your institution plans to take to promote free and open expression on its campus(es), including any steps toward bringing your speech policies in accordance with the First Amendment.”

Whenever possible, we work collaboratively with students, faculty, and administrators to reform policies that restrict protected speech on campus, and we have achieved significant success by doing so. For example, FIRE has partnered with campus community members to successfully eliminate or revise 57 speech codes at 31 different colleges and universities to date this year, guaranteeing the expressive rights of over 550,000 students.

In a related effort, we have also undertaken a campaign asking colleges and universities to adopt the free speech policy statement produced by the Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago earlier this year. The statement, a copy of which I have enclosed, guarantees “all members of the University community the broadest possible latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge, and learn,” and makes clear that “it is not the

Supp. 2d 853 (N.D. Tex. 2004); *Bair v. Shippensburg University*, 280 F. Supp. 2d 357 (M.D. Pa. 2003); *Booher v. Northern Kentucky University Board of Regents*, 1998 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 11404 (E.D. Ky. July 21, 1998); *Corry v. Leland Stanford Junior University*, No. 740309 (Cal. Super. Ct. Feb. 27, 1995) (slip op.); *UWM Post, Inc. v. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin*, 774 F. Supp. 1163 (E.D. Wisc. 1991); *Doe v. University of Michigan*, 721 F. Supp. 852 (E.D. Mich. 1989).

proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive.”

We are proud of the progress we have made towards ending campus censorship by working directly with colleges and universities. But given the depressing pervasiveness of campus speech codes, we have also begun aggressive new initiatives in recent years to achieve First Amendment compliance. For example, in July 2014, we launched our Stand Up For Speech Litigation Project, a national effort to eliminate unconstitutional speech codes through targeted First Amendment lawsuits. To date, we have filed 10 lawsuits, three of which remain ongoing. The seven suits completed thus far have resulted in successful settlements and policy revisions restoring the free speech rights of almost 200,000 students and securing over \$350,000 in damages and attorney’s fees. FIRE will continue to file lawsuits against public institutions that shirk their constitutional obligations to their students and faculty until full First Amendment compliance is achieved.

Of course, were public colleges and universities to voluntarily reform their speech-related policies in favor of freedom of expression, the need for litigation would be obviated. Your leadership on this issue would be welcome. Not only would eliminating speech codes at South Carolina’s public colleges and universities benefit the students and faculty who study and work at those institutions, it would send an invaluable message to all citizens about the importance of freedom of expression in our democracy.

My colleagues and I would be very pleased to discuss our concerns about speech codes on South Carolina’s campuses with you further at your convenience. I very much appreciate your attention to our concerns.

Sincerely,



Will Creeley
Vice President of Legal and Public Advocacy
Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

cc:

Paul Bennecke, Executive Director, Republican Governors Association
State Senator Curt Bramble, President Pro Tem, National Conference of State Legislatures
Dan Crippen, Executive Director, National Governors Association
Elisabeth Pearson, Executive Director, Democratic Governors Association

Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression

The Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago was appointed in July 2014 by President Robert J. Zimmer and Provost Eric D. Isaacs "in light of recent events nationwide that have tested institutional commitments to free and open discourse." The Committee's charge was to draft a statement "articulating the University's overarching commitment to free, robust, and uninhibited debate and deliberation among all members of the University's community."

The Committee has carefully reviewed the University's history, examined events at other institutions, and consulted a broad range of individuals both inside and outside the University. This statement reflects the long-standing and distinctive values of the University of Chicago and affirms the importance of maintaining and, indeed, celebrating those values for the future.

From its very founding, the University of Chicago has dedicated itself to the preservation and celebration of the freedom of expression as an essential element of the University's culture. In 1902, in his address marking the University's decennial, President William Rainey Harper declared that "the principle of complete freedom of speech on all subjects has from the beginning been regarded as fundamental in the University of Chicago" and that "this principle can neither now nor at any future time be called in question."

Thirty years later, a student organization invited William Z. Foster, the Communist Party's candidate for President, to lecture on campus. This triggered a storm of protest from critics both on and off campus. To those who condemned the University for allowing the event, President Robert M. Hutchins responded that "our students . . . should have freedom to discuss any problem that presents itself." He insisted that the "cure" for ideas we oppose "lies through open discussion rather than through inhibition." On a later occasion, Hutchins added that "free inquiry is indispensable to the good life, that universities exist for the sake of such inquiry, [and] that without it they cease to be universities."

In 1968, at another time of great turmoil in universities, President Edward H. Levi, in his inaugural address, celebrated "those virtues which from the beginning and until now have characterized our institution." Central to the values of the University of Chicago, Levi explained, is a profound commitment to "freedom of inquiry." This freedom, he proclaimed, "is our inheritance."

More recently, President Hanna Holborn Gray observed that "education should not be intended to make people comfortable, it is meant to make them think. Universities should be expected to provide the conditions within which hard thought, and therefore strong disagreement, independent judgment, and the questioning of stubborn assumptions, can flourish in an environment of the greatest freedom."

The words of Harper, Hutchins, Levi, and Gray capture both the spirit and the promise of the University of Chicago. Because the University is committed to free and open inquiry in all matters, it guarantees all members of the University community the broadest possible latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge, and learn. Except insofar as limitations on that freedom are necessary to the functioning of the University, the University of Chicago fully respects and supports the freedom of all members of the University community "to discuss any problem that presents itself."

Of course, the ideas of different members of the University community will often and quite naturally conflict. But it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. Although the University greatly values civility, and although all members of the University community share in the responsibility for maintaining a climate of mutual respect, concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as a justification for closing off discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members of our community.

The freedom to debate and discuss the merits of competing ideas does not, of course, mean that individuals may say whatever they wish, wherever they wish. The University may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the University. In addition, the University may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of the University. But these are narrow exceptions to the general principle of freedom of expression, and it is vitally important that these exceptions never be used in a manner that is inconsistent with the University's commitment to a completely free and open discussion of ideas.

In a word, the University's fundamental commitment is to the principle that debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the University community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed. It is for the individual members of the University community, not for the University as an institution, to make those judgments for themselves, and to act on those judgments not by seeking to suppress speech, but by openly and vigorously contesting the ideas that they oppose. Indeed, fostering the ability of members of the University community to engage in such debate and deliberation in an effective and responsible manner is an essential part of the University's educational mission.

As a corollary to the University's commitment to protect and promote free expression, members of the University community must also act in conformity with the principle of free expression. Although members of the University community are free to criticize and contest the views expressed on campus, and to criticize and contest

speakers who are invited to express their views on campus, they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe. To this end, the University has a solemn responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless freedom of debate and deliberation, but also to protect that freedom when others attempt to restrict it.

As Robert M. Hutchins observed, without a vibrant commitment to free and open inquiry, a university ceases to be a university. The University of Chicago's long-standing commitment to this principle lies at the very core of our University's greatness. That is our inheritance, and it is our promise to the future.

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Chair

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