

Guidelines Regarding Offensive Content in Classroom Learning

1. We recommend that the University does *not* adopt punitive speech codes or any form of censorship but instead use guidelines to promote honesty and integrity in the educational experience of students and faculty.
2. We recommend that all SU members recognize and acknowledge that teaching difficult, traumatic, sensitive subjects is essential to providing students with an honest and inclusive education. The intention of including potentially offensive sources is always to enhance the learning experience, never to demean anyone. Avoiding difficult topics or teaching whitewashed history is itself a form of censorship because it denies students the right to listen to the whole story.
3. We recommend that while teachers should be free to discuss their topic(s) in the classroom, they should avoid introducing controversial matter *which has no relation to their topic(s)*. The intent of this statement, however, is not to discourage what is “controversial.”¹
4. We recommend that ideas germane to a subject under discussion in a classroom cannot be censored simply because a student with particular religious or political beliefs might be offended. Instruction cannot proceed in the atmosphere of fear that would be created were a teacher to become subject to administrative sanction based upon the idiosyncratic reaction of one or more students. Students should be prepared to discuss subjects, in a sincere educational setting, that may engender discomfort.²
5. We recommend that teachers, whenever possible, alert students if assigned material contains anything that might trigger difficult emotional responses in students, but that teachers should not be required to do so.³
6. We recommend that teachers solicit and welcome student feedback and use it to help inform their pedagogical choices, including teaching sensitive subjects.
7. We recommend that teachers avoid putting students in experiences meant to simulate oppression, injustice, violence, or other negative aspects of history.⁴ We also recommend that teachers neither direct nor invite a student to read aloud offensive language.
8. We recommend that a teacher planning to *verbally discuss or quote* an educational source that contains racial slurs consider the following:
 - not all students pay full attention in class and may not realize the distinction between the use of a word and mentioning it as part of a quote.
 - some students may feel permitted to quote slurs, but less carefully than an instructor would.
 - there may be other sources that can be used to teach the same topic equally effectively.
 - we cannot assume that all students fully grasp *why* a particular word is offensive, though they know that it is. As one instructor put it: “By refusing to speak racist language, even in quotation, I can perhaps send some small message about the seriousness of these issues and about the power of history to construct our emotional landscapes, even after centuries.”⁵

¹ AAUP-AAC&U, *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, with 1970 Interpretive Comments*

² *Freedom in the Classroom*, June 2007.

³ AAUP, *On Trigger Warnings*, 2014; Association for Psychological Science, “Caution: Content warnings do not reduce stress, study shows.” *ScienceDaily*, 12 October 2023. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/10/231012161805.htm

⁴ [Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom](https://www.teachingushistory.com/2016/01/we-would-never-use-racial-slurs-in-class-but-how-should-we-mention-them.html)

⁵ <http://www.teachingushistory.co/2016/01/we-would-never-use-racial-slurs-in-class-but-how-should-we-mention-them.html>

9. The committee strongly recommends that SU adopt in full the following statement that was approved at UMD-College Park:

Statement of Free Speech Values

The primary purpose of a university is to discover and disseminate knowledge through teaching, research, and service. To fulfill these functions, a free exchange of ideas is necessary not only within its walls but with the world beyond. The history of intellectual discovery and growth clearly demonstrates the need for freedom, the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable. Whenever someone is deprived of the right to state unmentionable views, others are necessarily deprived of the right to listen to and evaluate those views. Few institutions in our society have this same central purpose. It follows that a university must protect and guarantee intellectual and academic freedom. To do so, it must promote an environment in which any and all ideas are presented. Through open exchange, vigorous debate, and rational discernment, the campus community can evaluate ideas.

Every member of the campus community has an obligation to support the right of free expression at the university and to refrain from actions that reduce intellectual discussion. No member shall prevent such expression, which is protected under the constitutions of the United States and the State of Maryland.

The University does not have a speech code. History shows that marginalized communities have successfully promoted their interests because of the right to express their views. In fact, marginalized communities have been silenced by speech codes and other regulations against "offensive" speech.

In addition to the obligation to promote and protect free expression, individuals assume further responsibilities as members of the university. The campus expects each individual community member to consider the harm that may result from the use of slurs or disparaging epithets intended to malign, for example, another's race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, political affiliation, or physical or mental disability. While legal protections for free expression may sometimes supersede the values of civility and mutual respect, members of the university community should weigh these values carefully in exercising their fundamental right to free expression.

The University values and embraces the ideals of freedom of inquiry, freedom of thought and freedom of expression, all of which must be sustained in a community of scholars. While these freedoms protect controversial ideas and differing views, and sometimes offensive and hurtful words and symbols, they do not protect conduct that violates criminal law or university policy.⁶

November 17, 2023

Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee
Tom Goyens, Chair

⁶ [Statement of Free Speech Values](#) (University of Maryland, College Park, 2018)