

Report of the Work Group on Speech, Expression and Civility June 2017

Context

“As an institution of higher learning, SLU must resist the urge to suppress speech and instead expose all ideas and positions, provocative or pedestrian, to critical scrutiny. The fundamental purpose of a community of scholars and learners is to engage respectfully rather than repress. And through this critical, yet civil engagement, the truth emerges.”

SLU President Fred Pestello
28 September 2016

President Pestello’s comments concerning the issues of campus speech and expression are in response to the reactions he has heard and observed when controversial speakers have been invited to campus, and the reaction to the individuals and their views by other members of the SLU community. He believes there is a need for a community dialogue on the issues of speech, expression and civility and a clear articulation of policies and procedures for invited speakers, performances and other means of expression of the diverse views that both characterize and enrich the university environment.

The Work Group on Speech, Expression and Civility is charged with reviewing current SLU policies and procedures regarding invited speakers and performers; researching policies and practices at other Catholic colleges and universities; leading campus conversations about campus speech, expression, civility and inclusion; inviting ideas and feedback from the SLU community; reviewing, discussing and analyzing the information collected; and making recommendations to the President regarding future policy and practice at Saint Louis University. This report was developed following a process of discernment involving students, faculty and staff representatives. It is intended as the base from which specific policies and procedures will be developed to guide the Saint Louis University community’s efforts to seek truth through constructive and civil dialogue.

I. The Jesuit Tradition of Education at Saint Louis University

In 1818, at the behest of Reverend Louis William DuBourg, Bishop of Louisiana, Saint Louis University became the first institution of higher learning west of the Mississippi River. In 1827, The Society of Jesus assumed responsibility of the fledging university. Over the past 175 years, SLU has borne witness to rapid social change, shifting mores, and the recasting of cultural values. Yet, despite these changes, it has remained committed to the Judeo-Christian conviction that all Creation, including human rationality, is fundamentally good and to the Catholic insistence on the harmony of faith and reason. These convictions guided Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas who looked upon Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle as vital sources of knowledge with profound insights into the human condition. The founder of the Jesuit order, Ignatius of Loyola, had confidence that the discerning mind could find God in all things. The Jesuit order has a history of learning from those beyond the boundaries of Christianity. Matteo Ricci, S.J. studied with Chinese mandarins in the 16th century and many Jesuits, building on Arabic and Greek foundations, achieved great renown as astronomers, physicists, and mathematicians in the 16th and 17th centuries. Because of this tradition, Saint Louis University fully embraces the pursuit of truth for the glory of God and the service of humanity.

II. Freedom of Speech and the Jesuit Tradition

The free and vigorous exchange of ideas, debate, discussion, and disputation are fundamental to the life of a university. In accordance with our Jesuit and Catholic heritage, we are committed to freedom of speech and expression for all members of our community and we welcome a diversity of views to campus. As a university community, we encourage speech that is: intelligent and elevating; respectful of all peoples regardless of race, ethnicity, religious affiliation (or lack thereof), gender, or sexual orientation; and not contemptuous toward the Jesuit-Catholic mission of our institution. Yet, our heritage commits us to welcome the open exchange of ideas that might be critical of our Jesuit-Catholic mission or offensive to some members of the community. Our commitment to seek the truth wherever it may be found impels us to tolerate even speech that produces offense. However, an invitation to speak on our campus does not express the university's endorsement or approval of a speaker's ideas or values.

III. Saint Louis University's Commitment to All Members of Its Community

The University affirms its commitment to its members, no matter their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, and it seeks to create an environment in which all members are treated with dignity and encouraged to participate fully in the life of the University. In accordance with the Constitution, the University prohibits any expressions deliberately intended to incite violence against any group, to threaten imminently the safety of any its members, or to promote the violation of law. Our internal documents, such as the *Student Handbook* and the *University's Harassment Policy*, prohibit harassment or expressions of bias or hate that "intimidate, mock, degrade, or threaten" members of our community but the best defense against hate is not to censor, rather it is to shine the bright light of speech on why we should reject hateful rhetoric. This is achieved with more open speech, not less.

IV. Concern for the Marginalized and Free Speech

In accordance with Catholic social thought, our university affirms a preferential option for those who are poor, vulnerable, or marginalized. We recognize that many members of our community identify with groups whose very existence has, at times, been imperiled. Apart from hate speech, restrictions on speech are not the best avenue for protecting the marginalized. Efforts to curtail speech that might be seen as offensive may well endanger the very groups those efforts intend to protect. Ordinarily, the best defense against offensive speech is a vigorous commitment to welcome a broad diversity of views, accompanied by measures to allow protest and provide support, especially for marginalized groups. The founders of our country recognized that a free people must be able to speak freely, without fear of retribution from their government. From such a simple assurance, comes the ability for citizenry to unite to identify and decry abuses of power and wrongdoing by individuals in position of authority. Free speech is the sine qua non of a democratic republic. The importance of free speech is magnified ten-fold on a university campus. And although the University community values its Catholic intellectual, religious, and moral heritage, its own commitment to seek the truth wherever it may be found impels it to be receptive to criticisms and questions, even if they produce discomfort.

V. Ignatian Guidelines for Civil Conversation

In 1546, St. Ignatius of Loyola offered guidelines for civility in difficult conversations. He had in mind Jesuit advisors attending the Council of Trent. We adapt his guidelines below and offer them as a model for the kind of dialogue we hope to encourage at Saint Louis University:

1. Be considerate and kind, especially when it comes to deciding on matters under discussion.
2. Be slow to speak, and only after having first listened quietly, so that you may understand the meaning, leanings, and wishes of those who do speak.
3. Consider the reasons on both sides without showing any attachment to your own opinion, and try to avoid bringing dissatisfaction to anyone.
4. Deal with everyone on an equal basis.
5. Give your opinion with the greatest possible humility and sincerity, and always end with the words *salvo meliori iudicio*—with due respect for a better opinion.
6. Take the time necessary for a full conversation, even if it is inconvenient.

SLU strives to be a community that is animated by commitments to pursuit of truth and the service of humanity. It is because of these commitments that we embrace freedom of thought, expression, and speech.