



University of Toronto – 2019 Annual Freedom of Speech Report

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Institutional culture

The commitment to free expression is one of the hallmarks of excellence at the University of Toronto. For over 25 years, the University of Toronto has had a formal policy framework that sets out its commitment to freedom of expression. This framework has allowed the University to foster free expression and deal effectively and expediently with issues that naturally arise at an institution unequivocally dedicated to the pursuit of truth and the advancement of knowledge, especially one of U of T's size and scope. We anticipate that this policy framework will continue to serve the University well.

Policy framework

In 1992, the Governing Council of the University of Toronto passed the University's [Statement of Institutional Purpose](#) and its [Statement on Freedom of Speech](#). These *Statements* have served as the cornerstones upon which the University of Toronto has built its commitment to free expression. In particular, the *Statement on Freedom of Speech* explicitly confirms that free expression is a core value of the University: "the essential purpose of the University is to engage in the pursuit of truth, the advancement of learning and the dissemination of knowledge. To achieve this purpose, all members of the University must have as a prerequisite freedom of speech and expression, which means the right to examine, question, investigate, speculate, and comment on any issue without reference to prescribed doctrine, as well as the right to criticize the University and society at large."

The policies also highlight two features of free expression that are critically important in the University context. First, the *Statement of Institutional Purpose* makes clear that free speech can be uncomfortable. The right to free speech, it stipulates, is "meaningless unless it entails the right to raise deeply disturbing questions and provocative challenges to the cherished beliefs of society at large and of the university itself." Every member of the University community should be prepared to confront opinions they find erroneous, unreasonable, or even deeply offensive. Such confrontations are part of the contest of ideas that drives discovery, understanding, and knowledge.

Second, the *Statement on Freedom of Speech* argues that the right to free expression imposes an accompanying responsibility upon its adherents. It must comply with applicable laws. But more than that, the exercise of free expression "depends upon an environment of tolerance and mutual respect. Every member of the University community should be able to work, live, teach and learn in a University free from discrimination and harassment." Threats or acts of violence are absolutely intolerable – the University will act swiftly and resolutely to protect and support its community. Speech or acts that

silence or demean individuals or groups are also gravely concerning. Indeed, such behaviour stands in direct opposition to free speech and subverts the contest of ideas at the heart of the University's mission.

Over the years, the University's commitment to free expression has been affirmed and expanded, resulting in a policy framework that includes the [Policy on the Disruption of Meetings](#) (1992), the [Statement on Equity, Diversity, and Excellence](#) (2006), the [Policy on the Temporary Use of Space](#) (2010), and the [Policy on Open, Accessible and Democratic Autonomous Student Organizations](#) (2016).

The University has also been working to educate members of its community and the public about the importance of free expression to the objectives of post-secondary institutions. This has included the launch and broad promotion of an [institutional website in 2017](#), as well as discussions with internal academic administrator groups of Principals and Deans, department Chairs and Directors, student services staff, College governing bodies, and groups of student leaders. Senior administrators have also been invited to give presentations to professional organizations such as the Canadian Association of University Business Officers (CAUBO), the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), and the Council of Chairs of Ontario Universities (CCOU), outlining the University of Toronto's longstanding and widely recognized approach to these issues.

Events

Non-curricular events, ranging from symposia and conference series to events sponsored by student organizations and external groups, are part of the rich fabric of academic and campus life offered at the University of Toronto's three campuses. Between January 1 and June 30, 2019, the University hosted several thousand¹ such events.

Students, staff and faculty members worked to ensure that these many events were planned and executed in a way that allowed a full opportunity for freedom of expression. For example, administrative staff and faculty members would typically engage with the parties prior to an event in order to hear any concerns. When concerns are raised, student leaders and staff discuss event planning with organizers and/or Campus Police to evaluate any security risks; meet with event organizers to emphasize the importance of the free exchange of ideas; and take other reasonable steps to avoid disruption of events. As a result, *the University received no freedom of expression-related complaints* processed through its existing policy framework during the period at issue.

A number of administrative offices at U of T support the various policies and statements that make up the policy framework, and they respond to any complaints that might result from events or incidents, or, indeed, from individuals who feel their right to freedom of expression has been infringed, curtailed or suppressed. These offices include: the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students for complaints about events hosted by autonomous campus groups; Conference Services at UTM or UTSC for complaints about external booking requests at those campuses; Academic + Campus Events for complaints about

¹ Given that the University was not made aware that government or HEQCO would be requesting such data, it is impossible to quantify this more accurately at an institution as large, complex and decentralized as the University of Toronto. For example, non-curricular events at the three campuses can be booked through a range of mechanisms depending on the type of event, the identity of the person booking the event (i.e. a student, staff or faculty member), and the location of the event. We anticipate that more accurate figures will be provided in subsequent years.

external booking requests at the St. George Campus; the Provost's Office for complaints about academic speech or public statements of a faculty member; the Division of University Advancement for complaints from alumni and benefactors; and the various equity offices on campus for incidents involving alleged discrimination and harassment. This multi-pronged approach allows students, staff, faculty members, and members of the community at large to voice their concerns through a wide range of offices, and to expect that the appropriate office that holds accountability for their stakeholder group and/or the particular policy at issue hears their concern.

The University accepts bookings for non-curricular events from *recognized campus groups* and refuses bookings from recognized campus groups only when there are compelling grounds to anticipate a significant security or safety risk, or there is good reason to believe that unlawful activity will occur. However, it should be emphasized that the threshold for taking such action is very high. No bookings from recognized campus groups were refused on free expression or related grounds during the period covered by this report.

Similarly, the University receives numerous requests from *external groups* to stage events on our campuses. Because the University has a primary responsibility to serve its own community, as well as to be a wise steward of public funds, its policy framework also indicates that additional factors may be considered when assessing a request for space from an external group. These include whether it is appropriate to divert resources from higher-priority space requests for University events or academic activities, safety, and the fairness of covering costs associated with an external event with University funding, which is primarily derived from tuition fees and public funds. During the period covered by this report, only one booking from an external group was refused on these grounds (see below).

Complaints

As stated above, the University received no freedom of expression-related complaints processed through its policy framework between January 1, 2019 and June 30, 2019. Nevertheless, there were at times vigorous disagreements on our campuses about whether or not an event should be allowed to proceed, and concerns raised to the University administration as a result. In our view, these disagreements are to be expected and can become 'teachable moments' that support the University's educational activities in general and allow it to reaffirm and promote its values around the importance of freedom of speech in particular. When concerns are raised about an event, the University strives to allow as full an expression of views as possible, undertaking the planning activities described above.

Between January and June of 2019, such concerns or disagreements arose with respect to a very small number of the thousands of events that were hosted on our campuses. Each was handled in an appropriate manner under the University's policy framework. For example:

- In March, a student organization at UTM hosted a lecture by a [controversial scholar](#). Because of the anticipated topic of the speech and the speaker's point of view, concerns were expressed and requests received from several members of the University community and the public (including an MPP) that the University should intervene and cancel the event. Despite these expressions of concern, the event proceeded as scheduled and without disruption. University administrators worked with some concerned students to engage constructively with the speaker during the Q&A session, leading to a thoughtful public discussion.

- Due to security concerns, in January 2019, the University denied a space booking request from an external group, the Canadian Nationalist Party, whose leader has since come [under investigation](#) for hate crimes by the RCMP.

In summary, while no complaints were received, the University routinely receives expressions of concern from internal stakeholder groups and the public about prospective or past academic and non-curricular events held on our campuses. Such concerns provide valuable opportunities for the University to hear from its community and to remind its membership of the importance of engaging with a diversity of perspectives in a civil and respectful way.

Concluding statement

The University of Toronto's policy framework on freedom of expression, anchored by the University's [Statement of Institutional Purpose](#) and its [Statement on Freedom of Speech](#), has been in place for over 25 years. During this time, it has served the University well and has demonstrated its effectiveness in allowing the University to adapt to the evolving landscape of free speech and expression. As such, the University of Toronto fosters vigorous discussion through the hosting events of many kinds on its campuses, and consistently strives to do so in a way that demonstrates respect for freedom of speech and a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives.