



University of Toronto – 2023 Annual Freedom of Speech Report

freespeech.utoronto.ca

Preamble

The commitment to free expression¹ continues to be one of the hallmarks of excellence at the University of Toronto. For more than 30 years, the University of Toronto has had a [formal policy framework](#) that sets out its commitment to free expression. That framework explains the vital importance of free expression at the University of Toronto (and at other institutions of higher education and advanced research) and it enumerates the community’s relevant rights and responsibilities. This framework has helped the University promote and protect free expression while also allowing the institution to deal effectively and in a principled fashion with issues and disagreements that naturally arise in the pursuit of truth and the advancement of knowledge. The University anticipates that this policy framework will continue to serve the institution well for years to come.

Institutional culture & policy framework

In 1992, the Governing Council of the University of Toronto approved the University’s [Statement on Freedom of Speech](#) and [Statement of Institutional Purpose](#).² 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:

[T]he 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

¹ In the University’s policies and statements, and throughout this Report, “freedom of speech” and “freedom of expression” (and their cognates) are used interchangeably.

² It is worth noting that the University of Toronto’s *Statement on Freedom of Speech* and *Statement of Institutional Purpose* predate the University of Chicago’s “Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression” – singled out by the Province as an example Ontario’s universities should follow – by more than two decades.

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* recognizes that the right to free expression imposes an accompanying responsibility. All those exercising their right to free expression must comply with the applicable laws of Canada and Ontario. 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 intolerable. Indeed, such behaviour stands in direct opposition to free speech and subverts the contest of ideas at the heart of the University’s mission. Free speech can function effectively only when one accepts the responsibility to respect and safeguard the rights of others to free speech.

Over the years, the University’s commitment to free expression has been affirmed and enhanced, 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 help educate members of its community and the general 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, University and College governing bodies, and groups of students and student leaders. Administrators, as well as faculty members, librarians, and students, are encouraged to avail themselves of opportunities for professional development and education in areas related to free expression. In fact, senior administrators and academics have often been invited to give presentations to professional organizations or lead educational sessions about free expression, highlighting the University of Toronto’s longstanding and widely recognized leadership on these issues.

Section A: Institutional Policy

Has your institution amended its free speech policy (or policy framework) since the time of your 2022 report? If so, please explain the reason for the change and provide the link to its location on your institutional website.

No.

Where are members of the institutional community (or guests) directed when there is a free-speech-related question or complaint about an institutional event? Please provide contact information.

Several administrative offices at the University of Toronto support the various policies and statements that make up the University's policy framework pertaining to free speech. Those offices respond to any concerns brought to their attention that might result from events or incidents, or from individuals who feel their right to free expression has been infringed, curtailed, or suppressed. Depending on the nature of the concerns raised, different offices may be involved.

Expressions of concern regarding external booking requests are considered by the campus where the booking is sought:

- Conference and Events Services at the University of Toronto Mississauga;
 - confserv.utm@utoronto.ca
- Conference Services at the University of Toronto Scarborough;
 - conferences@utsc.utoronto.ca
- Academic + Campus Events at the University of Toronto St. George;
 - ace.team@utoronto.ca

More generally, expressions of concern at the institutional level are considered as follows:

- the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students, for concerns raised about events hosted by autonomous student groups;
 - vp.students@utoronto.ca
- the Division of the Vice-President & Provost for concerns raised about academic speech or public statements of a faculty member;
 - provost@utoronto.ca
- the Division of University Advancement for concerns from alumni and benefactors;
 - dua.events@utoronto.ca
- the equity offices on each campus for incidents involving alleged discrimination and harassment;
 - <https://hrandequity.utoronto.ca/inclusion/equity-offices/>
- the Office of the Governing Council for concerns involving the University's governance bodies or processes;
 - governing.council@utoronto.ca
- the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Office for concerns involving access to information or privacy;
 - <https://governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/fipp>.

In addition, the Office of the President and all other senior executive offices are available to receive expressions of concern relating to their areas of responsibility.

This multi-pronged approach allows students, staff, faculty members, librarians, and members of the community at large to direct their concerns to the office that holds accountability for their stakeholder group or the particular policy at issue. It also provides the community with multiple channels through which members can engage with the University, effectively lowering barriers to accessing the administration, while simultaneously increasing institutional capacity, responsiveness, and visibility.

What is your institution's policy on holding events where there are security concerns? To your knowledge, were there any instances where a non-curricular event did not proceed due to security concerns or their related costs?

The *Policy on the [Temporary Use of Space at The University of Toronto](#)* (2010) articulates the principles governing the temporary use of University space by internal and external groups. Among those principles, the Policy sets out the following standard regarding the fairness of costs:

External groups must at least cover the full costs associated with room bookings. Our students, through their fees, should not be subsidizing external bodies. Internal groups, on the other hand, pay only minimal fees – nothing near full costs. We normally do not charge recognized campus groups and student societies at all, except for reasonable cost recovery for additional services beyond making the space available (such as post-event cleaning).

During the period covered by this report, no non-curricular events at the University of Toronto were cancelled or failed to proceed due to security concerns or related costs.

Section B: Complaints

Between August 1, 2022 and July 31, 2023, did any member of the institutional community (or guests) make an official complaint about free speech? If yes, please provide a general description that protects the privacy of complainants.

If there has been an official complaint (or more than one):

What were the issues under consideration? Please identify any points of contention (e.g., security costs, safety, student unions and/or groups, operational requirements, etc.).

and

How did the institution manage the free speech complaint(s)? Was the complaint addressed using the procedures set out in the policy? How were issues resolved?

The University received one official free speech complaint between August 1, 2022 and July 31, 2023.

The University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) Muslim Students' Association (MSA) held an event in March 2023, called "Feminism vs. Red Pill: Two Conflicting Ideologies. What does Islam say?" Before the event took place, the UTSC Women and Trans Centre raised concerns about two of the participants invited to speak. The Assistant Dean in the Office of Student Experience and Wellbeing [OSEW] spoke to both parties, calling attention to the University's policies on free expression and related matters. The event proceeded as planned.

During the event, an individual associated with a student group called Project START (Sexual Trauma & Assault Resource Team) disrupted the proceedings. UTSC's Campus Safety office intervened with a warning, the disruptive individual left, and the event continued and concluded successfully.

After the event, the UTSC MSA made an official complaint to UTSC's OSEW and Office of Student Life. Members of those offices, along with UTSC's Vice Principal Academic & Dean, addressed the complaint. OSEW made the point that voices raised in opposition, even disruptive ones, are often a consequence of hosting controversial topics. The principles of free expression apply to all sides in a debate and, while disrupting an event violates both the spirit — and, in some places, the letter — of the University's policy framework, the policies in this case worked to protect all participants' speech while ensuring that the event could take place and conclude successfully. After further review, the disruptive individual was not sanctioned. The UTSC MSA was satisfied that the matter had been referred to the Vice-Principal, Academic & Dean for consideration. The UTSC MSA made no further application once the matter was settled.

The University of Toronto considers this episode to be a successful example of how the University's policy framework protects and promotes free expression on its campuses.

Section C: Summary Data

Please provide the following summary data for free-speech-related official complaints received by the institution:

Number of official complaints received under the free speech policy relating to curricular and non-curricular events.	1
Number of official complaints reviewed that did not proceed.	0
Number of official complaints where the institution determined that the free speech policy was not followed appropriately.	0
Number of official complaints under the free speech policy that resulted in the institution applying disciplinary or other institutional measures.	0
To your knowledge, were any free speech complaints forwarded to the Ontario Ombudsman?	No

To the best of your ability, please provide an estimate of the number of non-curricular events held at the institution either online or in person between August 1, 2022 and July 31, 2023. Non-curricular events include, for example, invited speakers, sporting events, rallies, student life/student affairs events, conferences, etc., as opposed to regular events held as part of an academic program or course.

The University of Toronto estimates that 20,000 non-curricular events were held at the University of Toronto (including all three campuses) between August 1, 2022 and July 31, 2023. The University does not track non-curricular online events.

[Institutional Comments](#)

From August 1, 2022 to July 31, 2023, the University of Toronto received one official free speech complaint, against a backdrop of some 20,000 events (an average of more than 50 events a day across seven colleges and 18 Faculties on three campuses). This result speaks first to the efficacy of the University's policy framework on freedom of expression. More importantly, it reflects the nature of a diverse academic community accustomed to encountering new and challenging ideas and beliefs – struggling with and learning from those encounters even when they prove disturbing, provocative, or offensive. Debates, unconstrained by preordained conclusions or fear of exclusion, are fundamental to the pursuit of truth, knowledge, and understanding. These are among the University's core values.