



University of Toronto – 2024 Annual Freedom of Speech Report

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Preamble

This Annual Report is prepared and posted in accordance with the Provincial government’s 2018 announcement that all “publicly-assisted colleges and universities would be required to develop, implement and comply with a free speech policy that meets a minimum standard prescribed by the government and based on best practices from around the world.”

The commitment to free expression continues to be one of the hallmarks of excellence at the University of Toronto. For over 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 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.

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](#).¹ These Statements are 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

¹ 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.

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 recognizes that the right to free expression imposes an accompanying responsibility upon its adherents. All those exercising their freedom of 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. The University will act swiftly and resolutely to protect and support its community. 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 as well.

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) among other important documents.

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 such as the Council of Ontario Universities and the Association of College and University Policy Administrators, and lead educational sessions about free expression at other Ontario universities, 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 2023 report? If so, please explain the reason for the change and provide the link to its location on your institutional website.

Yes. In response to questions from leaders within various faculties, departments, schools, etc., the Provost issued a [Memo on Institutional, Divisional, and Departmental Statements](#). This Memo augments the University’s free speech policy framework and provides additional resources to the community.

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 incidents or speech occurring at events, or from individuals who feel their right to freedom of 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 St. George Campus;
 - 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 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.

In January 2024, the University created the position of [Provostial Adviser on Civil Discourse](#). The Adviser has established a working group to lead community consultations and develop a plan for University events, resources, and other initiatives for students, faculty, and librarians to engage in and promote productive and respectful dialogue on a wide variety of topics. The Adviser will also provide an additional point of contact for community members with questions or concerns about free expression.

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. (The specific issue regarding protestors who encamped on the University's Front Campus is treated below.)

Section B: Complaints

Between August 1, 2023 and July 31, 2024, 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 seven official free speech complaints between August 1, 2023 and July 31, 2024.

[1] In October 2023, a rally and a counter-rally took place on the University's downtown campus. In January 2024, several faculty members wrote to the University's senior administration with an official complaint, arguing that the University had tolerated speech they described as violent and hateful, and claiming that a part of the university community had been "intimidated" and "silenced". They referred indirectly to the University's free speech policy framework. Though the complainants did not call for a specific remedy, their concerns were addressed through discussion with senior University officials. This is an example of an official complaint that, in the language of this Report, "did not proceed". It is also an example of the successful use of the University's free speech policy framework.

[2] In October 2023, the Temerty Faculty of Medicine received an official complaint alleging that the Faculty had removed a speaker from her position as an instructor in an upcoming workshop, thus violating her freedom of speech, among other things. However, the University did not remove the speaker from the workshop. Rather, it was decided that the workshop itself, which had been planned before the events of October 7, 2023, should be postponed given that the context in which the workshop was to have taken place had changed. This is an example of an official complaint that, in the language of this Report, "did not proceed".

[3] In February 2024, Sami Hamdi was invited to speak at an event on the University of Toronto Mississauga campus. Before the event, an external organization (among others) objected, citing concerns about safety, wellbeing, and 'caustic ideas,' among other issues. The administration had reviewed his previous speeches and determined that, while his arguments would likely be offensive to some, they were not judged to be hateful or discriminatory. The event proceeded as planned. Campus Safety took additional steps to ensure it could be held safely and the University of Toronto Mississauga Principal's office had staff at the event to monitor the speech in real time. This is an example of an official complaint that, in the language of this Report, "did not proceed". It is also an example of the successful use of the University's free speech policy framework.

[4] In March 2024, an external group reserved a room on the University of Toronto's downtown campus to screen the film *Israelism*. The planned screening generated a large amount of negative feedback and there were numerous calls on the University administration to cancel the event. The University administration advised organizers as to plans for security so that the event could proceed, but the event organizers, not the University administration, made the decision to move the screening to an off-campus venue. This is an example of an official complaint that, in the language of this Report, "did not proceed". It is also an example of the successful use of the University's free speech policy framework.

[5] In March 2024, an event at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto was disrupted by protesters. The University received a complaint from an attendee who asked for an

explanation as to why the protesters were not removed. The University explained that the administration had followed the process outlined in its [Policy on the Disruption of Meetings](#) (part of the free speech policy framework), which is designed to respect the balance between the right to protest and the right to free expression while avoiding the risk of violent confrontation. When the protestors did not leave and allow the event to resume, the event was adjourned and rescheduled to a virtual event at which the guest speaker presented his remarks in full, consistent with the terms of the Policy. This is an example of an official complaint that, in the language of this Report, “did not proceed”. It is also an example of the successful use of the University’s free speech policy framework.

[6] In April 2024, an individual approached an office at the University of Toronto Mississauga asking about protest protocols for an upcoming event called “T.M. Krishna in Concert”. A staff member provided inaccurate information and dissuaded the individual from protesting. The individual filed an official complaint, citing aspects of the University’s free speech policy framework. The administration apologised to the individual, corrected the information, and reviewed the matter with the team leader and the staff member who had provided inaccurate information. This is an example of an official complaint that, in the language of this Report, “did proceed”. It is also an example of the successful use of the University’s free speech policy framework.

[7] In June 2024, a faculty member wrote to the Chair of the Department of Human Geography at the University of Toronto Scarborough calling attention to a campaign to solicit signatures for an open letter being circulated. The authors of the letter intended to seek the Chair’s endorsement to issue the letter on behalf of the Department as a whole. The faculty member objected, arguing that such letters purporting to speak for the entire department “likely [infringe] on the speech rights of those in the minority”. In response, the Chair indicated that the Department would not be endorsing the letter as a representative statement. The Provost had already issued a [Memo on Institutional, Divisional, and Departmental Statements](#) in April of 2024 that included the following guidance:

Academic freedom supports the right of all faculty members and librarians, including academic leaders, to make statements as individuals. In general, leaders of an academic unit should promote respectful dialogue and protect the academic freedom of individual colleagues to research and teach contested ideas by maintaining an environment that is conducive to free inquiry. To maintain such an environment, and in light of the internal diversity of our community, the issuance or endorsement of a public statement that purports to represent the views of everyone in an academic unit or program is strongly discouraged.

The Chair’s response, together with the Provost’s earlier Memo, resolved the matter. This is an example of an official complaint that, in the language of this Report, “did not proceed”. It is also an example of the successful use of the University’s free speech policy framework.

[8] Between May 2 and July 3, 2024, the University of Toronto’s Front Campus was the site of an encampment of protesters demanding that the University “among other things, divest itself of holdings

that they believe further injustices to Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza”.² The protesters restricted access to Front Campus, allowing only those who agreed with certain political and ideological positions to enter and use this University space.

The encampment sparked significant controversy and national media attention. There were also several letter-writing campaigns resulting in several thousands of letters, most of which registered the same official free speech-related complaints in identical letters. The University issued a Notice of Trespass on May 24 requiring the protesters to leave Front Campus. The protesters refused, arguing that the Notice infringed their rights to free speech (in their contention, as protected by the University’s free speech policy framework and the *Charter* of Rights and Freedoms). The University applied to the Ontario courts for an interlocutory injunction to end the encampment on May 27. The protesters argued, among other things, that the injunction would infringe on their rights to free speech.

The court granted the University’s application for an injunction on July 2 and ordered the protesters to leave Front Campus. In its reasons, the Court found that the University had not infringed on the protesters’ rights to free expression:

At the outset of the balancing analysis it is important to make a critical contextual point. The injunction does not shut down the protesters’ right to freedom of expression. The University has made it clear that the protesters continue to have the right to protest anywhere on campus between the hours of 7 AM and 11 PM. They are free to march, assemble, make speeches, chant, engage passersby, hold signs, hand out pamphlets and engage in other acts of protest. The only restriction the injunction would impose is to prohibit camping, setting up structures or blocking entry to University property. [Para. 171]

The Court further agreed with the University’s argument that protest had infringed on the free speech rights of the community:

The protesters’ conduct is inconsistent with freedom of expression [Para. 194]

The University has a series of policies that aim to ensure that free speech is assured to all community members. This includes ensuring that no voices are excluded from exercising free speech on University property. The [encampment] occupants have controlled entry to Front Campus in a way that excludes opposing voices and excludes people who are apolitical and simply want to use Front Campus as an attractive recreational space. [Para. 13]

² All quotes in this summary are taken from the official court document “University of Toronto (Governing Council) v. Doe et al. 2024 ONSC 3755”. The history, details, and issues surrounding the protest are readily available from the media and other sources. This Report makes no attempt to articulate or engage with those issues apart from what is necessary to respond to the Ministry’s requirements.

The protestors complied with the ruling and left Front Campus on July 3, 2024. This was an extremely difficult matter for all involved. The University considers it an example of an official complaint that, in the language of this Report, “did proceed”. It is also an example of how the University’s free speech 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.	8
Number of official complaints reviewed that did not proceed.	6
Number of official complaints where the institution determined that the free speech policy was not followed appropriately.	2
Number of official complaints under the free speech policy that resulted in the institution applying disciplinary or other institutional measures.	2
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 does not track non-curricular online events. The University of Toronto estimates that more than 25,000 non-curricular events were held in-person at the University of Toronto (including all three campuses) between August 1, 2023 and July 31, 2024.

Institutional Comments

The University of Toronto’s policy framework on freedom of expression, with the University’s [Statement on Freedom of Speech](#) and [Statement of Institutional Purpose](#) at its core, has been in place for over 30 years. This framework is at the heart of the University of Toronto’s commitment to excellence in higher education and advanced research.

It is striking to note that from August 1, 2023 to July 31, 2024, the University of Toronto received only 8 unique official free speech complaints, against a backdrop of over 25,000 events (an average of roughly

70 events a day across seven colleges and 18 Faculties on three campuses). The encampment sparked significant controversy and national media attention. There were several letter-writing campaigns resulting in many thousands of emails, most of which registered the same concerns in identical messages about the content of the speech seen and heard at the encampment and other protests.

All of this correspondence, protest, and counter-protest reflects the nature of a diverse academic community encountering new and/or challenging ideas and beliefs – and struggling and learning from those encounters when they prove disturbing, provocative, or even offensive. The interaction and competition among new, unfamiliar, and sometimes uncomfortable ideas, perspectives, and beliefs stretch our understanding and knowledge, and can often spark breakthroughs in many fields of human endeavour. As our [Statement on Freedom of Speech](#) states:

The existence of an institution where unorthodox ideas, alternative modes of thinking and living, and radical prescriptions for social ills can be debated contributes immensely to social and political change and the advancement of human rights both inside and outside the University.

At the University of Toronto, being upset – or even deeply offended – by something someone says and then expressing disagreement, upset, or offence is not considered as registering an official free speech complaint. It is part of the process of respecting free speech and engaging in the marketplace of ideas at the very heart of the University’s mission.

At the same time, the University continues to emphasize that freedom of speech is possible only when the right to free speech is accompanied by the responsibility to respect the rights of others to free speech. Shouting down or silencing others suppresses speech and so stands in opposition to the principles of free expression and the education and research missions of the University of Toronto. Standards of respect, decency, and inclusion are not in tension with free speech – they ground and support such freedoms.

These ideas ground the University’s free speech policy framework and the results noted in this Report illustrate the efficacy of that framework once again this year.