

Statement of Responsibilities by the Columbia Academic Freedom Council

Adopted January 17, 2024 by the Co-Chairs of the Columbia Academic Freedom Council

The Columbia Academic Freedom Council was founded in 2023 as an organization of faculty and research officers at Columbia University dedicated to promoting open inquiry, intellectual diversity, and civil discourse.

We have come together to re-articulate and re-assert the timeless and liberal purposes, values, practices, and traditions of a university. We believe these have come under pressure in recent decades, a trend which, left unchecked, will further erode societal trust in our universities as centers of teaching, learning, research, and innovation. When institutions of higher education stray from their academic missions, they create a vacuum at the “vital center” of liberal civil society.

Change can be challenging, and culture changes can be generational, especially at large and venerable institutions like ours. But there is no one but us and no time but now. We are therefore encouraged by Columbia University’s recent initiatives of “[reinvesting in our values and mission](#)” and look forward to their effective implementation.

We have prepared a statement reminding us of responsibilities—intentionally called “responsibilities” in recognition of our faculty’s need to assume them. We welcome our colleagues’ feedback, comments, and criticism.

- I. **Responsibility to protect academic freedom.** Like many on campus, we believe that the liberal ideal of academic freedom—the freedom to think, write, publish, and teach without restrictions in the course of our duties as scholars—is core to the search for knowledge and the advancement of the human condition. We strongly support the right of any individual or group within our community to express their views individually or collectively.

The exercise of academic freedom demands the integrity and courage to face free, robust, and uninhibited debate, and to engage with views we think are wrong-headed or even offensive. We support the [Chicago Principles of 2014](#), which were adopted by Columbia University in 2016. We oppose the introduction of speech codes. Indeed, while universities should always be safe from discrimination and violence, there should be no “safe spaces” from ideas. The suggestion that we should be “protected” from ideas we might find objectionable in the search for knowledge infantilizes and discredits us all. The right response to speech we oppose is not censorship but more, better-reasoned, and more persuasive speech.

- II. **Responsibility to uphold tolerance and respect.** Even as we disagree, we must do so in a respectful manner, with courtesy and an assumption of good faith. Respectful conduct is an integral part of our institution’s culture, without which it cannot thrive as a community of scholars. We support the consistent and even-handed enforcement of our [Rules of University Conduct](#), particularly in cases of the “heckler’s veto,” as well as our [Non-](#)

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[Discrimination Statement and Policy](#). Any discrimination, harassment, intimidation, or other interference with university functions, such as teaching, is unacceptable.

- III. **Responsibility to encourage civil discourse.** Protecting free speech, while also promoting civility, is not an easy task. In nurturing this sort of institutional culture, faculty have a special responsibility to model this type of discourse, while also encouraging our students to engage in it. This effort should include creating the forums, setting the expectations, and building the skills for students to explore their own ideas in a respectful but rigorous way. Teaching students to put these skills into practice and encouraging them to exercise personal judgment—especially in these tense times—is vital to a liberal education.
- IV. **Responsibility of institutional neutrality.** We believe, [as the Kalven Committee stated in 1967](#), that a university is “the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic.” We believe that Columbia University should affirmatively, proactively, and publicly honor this principle, except in the rare case when the University has a compelling institutional interest, such as a legal obligation, that requires it to take a position. Where we have fallen short in the past, we must acknowledge that and set different expectations for the future.
- V. **Responsibility of external awareness.** We believe that our faculty have much to contribute to the outside world, and much to learn from it. We welcome dialogue with our supporters, our alumni, public and private sector leaders, and the public.
- VI. **Responsibility to the institution.** We believe in the potential and the power of great institutions to do good in this world. We believe that future generations benefit from us sustaining and strengthening these institutions. Where reforms are needed, we will openly advocate for them—but we do so as “stewards” rather than “antagonists”. We share a responsibility, through our participation in shared governance mechanisms, for advancing these initiatives.

In our view, this is a critical moment to reaffirm, strengthen, and recommit to the fundamental values that have made American universities leaders in the world—for which we, as the faculty, seek to play a constructive role. We welcome opportunities to exchange ideas and perspectives with all members of the Columbia University community, with our peers at other universities, and with the general public.