

Freedom of Speech and Expression Based on University of Chicago Statement on Freedom

Because the Woolf Institute is committed to free and open inquiry in all matters, it guarantees all staff, students and visitors the broadest possible latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge, and learn. Except insofar as limitations on that freedom are necessary to its functioning, the Institute fully respects and supports the freedom of all staff, students and visitors “to discuss any problem that presents itself.”

Of course, the ideas of different people will often and quite naturally conflict. But it is not the proper role of the Institute to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. Although the Institute greatly values civility, and although all associated with the Institute share in the responsibility for maintaining a climate of mutual respect, concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as a justification for closing off discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some others.

The freedom to debate and discuss the merits of competing ideas does not, of course, mean that individuals may say whatever they wish, wherever they wish. The Institute may restrict expression that violates the law that falsely defames a specific individual that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the Institute. In addition, the Institute may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt its ordinary activities. But these are narrow exceptions to the general principle of freedom of expression, and it is vitally important that these exceptions never be used in a manner that is inconsistent with the Institute’s commitment to a completely free and open discussion of ideas.

In sum, the Institute’s fundamental commitment is to the principle that debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most staff, students and visitors at the Institute to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed. It is for individuals at the Institute, not for the Institute as an institution, to make those judgments for themselves, and to act on those judgments not by seeking to suppress speech, but by openly and vigorously contesting the ideas that they oppose. Indeed, fostering the ability of its staff, students and visitors to engage in such debate and deliberation in an effective and responsible manner is an essential part of the Institute’s educational mission.

As a corollary to the Institute's commitment to protect and promote free expression, the Institute's staff, students and visitors must also act in conformity with the principle of free expression. Although they are free to criticise and contest the views expressed by others, and to criticise and contest those speakers who are invited to express their views, they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe. To this end, the Institute has a solemn responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless freedom of debate and deliberation, but also to protect that freedom when others attempt to restrict it.

