Phoenix Expression

An Introductory Discussion Guide on Free Speech and Responsible Discourse

PARRHESIA
PUBLIC DISCOURSE
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Acknowledgments

This discussion guide was created by UChicago's Parrhesia Program for Public Thought and Discourse as part of Orientation Programming to introduce the Class of 2029 to the University's culture of free expression.
The guide was written by a team of undergraduate students – Bezawit Kubsa, Juan-Diego Lara and Nate Youman, under the supervision of Ekaterina Lukianova, Associate Director of the Parrhesia Program for Public Discourse.

We began this project by collecting concerns and stories from students, faculty, administrators, and parents. This guide invites you to explore three approaches to the issue of free expression, which we synthesized through careful study of the concerns and stories we gathered. These three perspectives co-exist and often inform one another, even if they contradict each other in specific circumstances. Examples given to illustrate each approach are real-life cases that were shared with us and/or that we directly observed. Out of respect for privacy, we withheld the names of students who were involved in these cases; where appropriate, the names were changed.

As a team, we would like to thank faculty, students, and administrators who shared their experiences and insights, helping us research examples and offering helpful comments. In particular, our gratitude goes to Leora Auslander, John Boyer, Adom Getachew, Tom Ginsburg, Callie Maidhof, Peggy Mason, Marcos Werning, and Christopher Wild. Their input has helped us make this guide more accurate, purposeful, and more engaging. We are responsible for any remaining inaccuracies and overgeneralizations, and are always happy to engage in discussion about them.

Introduction

Your transition from high school to college is more than just a change in environment; it's an opening of doors, some expected and some completely unanticipated. College offers you the space to engage in self-discovery, professional growth, and deep intellectual exploration. But at the heart of this journey lies something often overlooked: the freedom to participate in open expression and inquiry. The University of Chicago is known for its commitment to free expression. Its students pursue bold, unconventional paths of learning. When people think of "free expression," they often imagine someone simply standing in the public square and speaking their beliefs. But in a university setting, expression permeates our experience and becomes inseparable from inquiry.

You are not here just to speak. You are here to listen, question, test, rethink, and refine. In our academic community, we all take turns being students and teachers, speakers and listeners. This collective practice becomes a tool that helps all of us confront our differences and reach for a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world.

From High School to College

In high school, you presumably had strict curriculum requirements and limited extracurricular options. Conversations likely tended to remain non-controversial. Even when this was not the case, you relied mostly on your family and community to build relationships and test out ideas. UChicago flips the script and throws the doors wide open.

In the classroom, our students explore disciplines that once seemed remote or even invisible. More importantly, growth does not stop when class ends. There is a wide range of extracurricular opportunities to discover your interests, politics, and communities, including participation in Recognized Student Organizations (RSOs).

Some of the most transformative growth occurs outside any structured space, beginning in the unscripted, in-between moments. Late-night dorm debates, conversations that spill from class into dining halls, and arguments sparked by guest lecturers all leave lasting impressions. These exchanges will challenge your thinking, broaden your perspective, and shape how you relate to both the University community and the world.

Expression and Inquiry in Practice

All of this makes creating and sustaining a culture of free expression not just important, but integral to your daily life and broader college experience, as each student class brings new experiences and insights to campus. In this discussion guide, we introduce you to the norms, aspirations, and tensions

that define the culture of free expression and inquiry at UChicago. You are invited to consider three different approaches to freedom of expression and inquiry, each defined by historical moments where freedom of expression was invoked and contested on campus. From there, we will engage in dialogue about the questions that may arise from your own experience. Together, we will explore our expectations, reflect on our responsibilities, and practice new ways of engaging in the conversations that matter most.

This discussion guide introduces you to some of the norms, aspirations and tensions involved in the culture of free expression and inquiry so central to the UChicago experience. You are invited to consider some historic cases (recent and not so recent) where freedom of expression on campus was invoked and contested. We will then dialogue about some questions that may arise for you in your College experience. We will compare our expectations and hopes, and test different lines of thinking about ways to engage in conversations about complex societal issues.

Student leader Bernie Sanders, AB ’64, speaking to the crowd of fellow sit-in participants.

Harry Kalven (left) and Edward Levi (right), two faculty members who prominently changed the course of free speech discussions at UChicago.

Perspective 1: We Can Work It Out

The emphasis is on the value of engagement with alternative views and on robust dialogue across difference.

At UChicago, free expression is not just a theoretical value but a tool we're expected to use. It means asking difficult questions, speaking honestly in class, and engaging in disagreement without retreat. Through this, we create better scholarship and science, a better community, and a better political world. But how, exactly, does one begin to participate in meaningful dialogue and deliberation as an undergraduate?

Approach in Practice:

One example is the formation of the Department of Race, Diaspora, and Indigeneity and the ensuing debates about its intellectual project. For years, UChicago lacked a department focused on race or indigenous studies. After the 2020 racial justice protests, students, faculty, and alumni called for change.

An apolitical faculty committee launched a deliberative process - they formed working groups and hosted forums to gather input from a variety of stakeholders, including undergraduates. Students voiced both support and concerns. Some students advocated for stronger representation of specific traditions like Asian-American studies; others worried the department might lack transformative potential. On the other hand, some conservative leaning faculty and alumni expressed concern that the department would promote a narrow political agenda. Finally, the name of the department - "Race, Diaspora, and Indigeneity" - emerged as a way to capture a variety of views, a commitment to scholarly rigor, and a vision for global, comparative frameworks.

Approach in Student Life:

Though this was a high-profile moment, deliberation happens every day in quieter ways. Conversations that begin in classrooms often continue over meals, in house lounges, or on the walk home. One student we interviewed reflected about one currently divisive conversation in his dorm:

"When I entered UChicago, the conflict in the Middle East was a hot- button issue. One night in the house common room, a debate came up. In that room was one pro-Israel student, one pro-Palestine student, and one uninformed but curious student. Over the course of the night, we discussed the situation extensively, but also the context of debate surrounding it. We all concluded that we had felt fear to discuss it around our peers, but that in the end, the discussion was a difference of values and perception. The night ended, extremely amicably, though we went into it prepared for a fight. The curious student probed us equally, and we remained extremely charitable to the other side. This was a night that, we later agreed, made us feel more free to express ourselves without censoring ourselves."

Such experiences prepare students to think and argue in good faith. Engaging across differences is never simple. It happens in the context of real political struggle, deeply held beliefs, and at times, painful histories. And like any other university, UChicago wrestles with moments of societal tension. But the goal is not perfect harmony. It is to build a community where open dialogue remains the default response even when the stakes are high. That is the promise of free expression as not simply a right, but as a responsibility we share.

Approach Tenets:

- A commitment to free expression calls for open debates, communication, and discussion.
- Free expression in practice is not a right, but a responsibility to discuss and search for both compromise and truth. This helps society and creates good scholarship.
- Students should both be included and seek out inclusion in decision-making on campus.

Students ask questions about the concept of Open Data at a club event.

Let's think together about the following questions:

1.What is your experience engaging with disagreements?

2. What issues are you most eager to talk about in depth while you're here?

3. Imagine you are part of the student government responding to students' calls to make a public statement in favor of urging the University to divest from companies that harm the environment. How would you structure the process to ensure genuine deliberation? Would you listen to some people more than others?

Perspective 2: Protect The Critics

The emphasis is on the role that critics play in academic life disrupting comfortable ways of thinking and on the particular value of youth activism in democratic life.

Expression and Inquiry Involves Protecting Dissenters

Learning and growth involve questioning systems, policies, and structures. By doing this, you find your place in the University community and your sense of purpose beyond it. The University has traditions of both activism and introspection, making space for intellectual and personal growth. Even if you do not see yourself as especially political, you still have a stake in how the University supports, protects, and responds to those who speak out and question when others do not.

Approach in Practice:

One historical example that illustrates this dynamic is the 1969 protests over Marlene Dixon, a sociology professor known for her Marxist politics and feminist scholarship. When the University chose not to renew her contract, many students believed the decision was politically motivated. They organized a two-week sit-in at the administration building. The protest raised serious questions about academic freedom, political pressure, and who gets to shape the values and direction of a university. Responding to those concerns, a reviewing committee was created by President Levi, which concluded that Dixon's contract was terminated for academic reasons, not political ones.

Despite that outcome, the sit-in sparked major structural reforms across campus. One lasting outcome was the development of the Shils Report in 1970. The report outlined clear standards for faculty hiring: research, teaching, intellectual contributions, and service. Political views, gender, race, or religion were not to be considered. The report helped formalize a commitment to fairness and scholarly integrity over ideology.

The protest also came with real consequences for students. Levi refused to call in the police during the sit-in, but once it ended, 42 students were expelled and 62 were suspended. Eventually, pushback against these disciplinary policies led to reforms. The University adjusted its approach to handling student protests to protect student rights while maintaining institutional standards.

Approach in Student Life:

These dynamics are not confined to moments of protest. They continue to play out in everyday academic life. One professor described a student in her course on impact investing who spent the quarter challenging the very foundations of the field in class discussions. His final paper presented a principled argument against impact investing, supported by careful research and thoughtful reasoning. The professor welcomed his dissent. It added depth to the class, showed others that disagreement is not only acceptable but necessary, and demonstrated that intellectual challenge, when expressed with care and academic rigor, has value.

Conversations about protest, classroom disagreement, and institutional duty remain active on campus today. The boundaries of what respectful disagreement looks like are still being tested and redefined. But the core principle endures. Students who ask hard questions, who challenge assumptions, and who push the University and each other to grow are participating in a long and ongoing tradition. Their voices deserve not only protection, but particular attention.

Approach Tenets:

- A commitment to free expression means protecting the critics and encouraging dissent: their insights often prompt institutional change for the better.
- One can protect the critics while still disciplining the disruption of the academic process.
- Dissent in class and in the wider academic community allows the group to question the existing status quo and reach a more nuanced understanding of it.

Members of the Concerned Students Group, at a faculty meeting discussing the discipline taken toward sit-in participants.

Let's think together about the following questions:

1.Is there a concern you care so deeply about that you would put yourself on the line for it?

2. The disciplinary committee(s) at UChicago has student members. Imagine you are one of them. What student actions would you want to protect? What student actions do you think should be subject to discipline?

3. You are in a science communication class. The professor asks students to relate the main arguments from a reading on the role of hearing in social life. One student speaks up, refusing to engage with the reading. They argue that the reading is ableist because the author emphasizes the importance of hearing and does not acknowledge the experiences of deaf people. How would you respond as the professor? How would you act as another student?

Approach 3: Respect Differences and Give Space

The emphasis is on respect for profound differences and restraint to give space for a plurality of views.

Letting others believe what they want

Another concept that underlies UChicago's commitment to free inquiry and expression is "institutional neutrality". It means the University should remain neutral on any political opinion that may be expressed and/ or explored by its individual members (faculty or students). This is to ensure space for a plurality of views on campus, where no opinion is stifled because there is an "institutional" position to the contrary. It implies that any discussion about differences must be instigated by members of the academic community. Thus, it's possible some discussions will not occur, or be significantly delayed.

Approach in Practice:

One recent example of students questioning neutrality is the COVID-19 pandemic. During it, the University mandated vaccination, social distancing, and masks. The university also required that students sign a statement that "failure to follow the [COVID-19] requirements may endanger myself and/or others." Members of the *Chicago Thinker*, the conservative newspaper on campus, charged that this agreement and the University's policies mandated "mental submission," violating neutrality. They argued that they should not feel obligated to constantly embody actions and speech that violate their ideology. Additionally, students at the *Thinker* expressed anxiety that their fellow students would report or dox them for standing less than 6 feet apart.

The University administrators responded to the Thinker over email, but the Thinker still charged the University was ignoring them and indoctrinating the student body. The Thinker's representatives were interviewed on Fox News and MSNBC and criticized the University without any impediment from the University administration. In this respect, the students' right to express a substantially different opinion was respected, even as the University administration chose not to engage further with their arguments.

Approach in Student Life:

Often, the strategy of giving respectful space to dissent while not mandating a discussion, is reflected in dorm life. For instance, in one dorm, a group of close first-year housemates, both liberal and conservative, were concerned with how to respond to another first-year student. He consistently talked politics in the house lounge, making racist and homophobic arguments "as a bit," making others uncomfortable when they engaged in political discussions.

Everybody in the group, including both right and left-leaning students, considered him a friend and didn't want to make him feel ostracized from the group by simply asking him to stop and restricting his speech. The House Council jointly asked him if he would be ok with a policy where everyone had to scale back discussing politics, unless there was an explicit agreement to debate. In practice, this meant students changing the subject from politics whenever this student walked into the dining hall.

Soon after, everybody was back to playing FIFA, board games, and Intramural sports with him like nothing happened. This approach allows for the expression of dissenting views, encouraging both tolerance and respect for boundaries. However, it puts less onus on university community members to engage with difference or change their ways in response to criticism.

Approach Tenets:

- The University and other students should respect differences and give space for viewpoint diversity, but only engage in deliberation when necessary
- If engaging with dissent fractures a community, it's a valid strategy to simply allow expression without facilitating any dialogue
- One should be tolerant of contrary political views, recognizing that direct engagement is not always practical, efficient or even desirable.

Students having a spirited discussion together at a dining hall on campus.

Let's think together about the following questions:

1.What, in your experience, is an example of disagreement that we are unlikely to resolve for a long time?

2. Are students obligated to engage in a discussion with views they find hurtful? If so, to what extent?

3. You are in a classroom and another student expresses a well-intentioned, but possibly hurtful opinion (for example, an argument in favor of anti-immigration policies). How would you expect you, as the professor, to handle this? How would you react, if the professor invited you, as a student, to speak?

Dialogue and Deliberation Opportunities on Campus

Many of these organizations and initiatives have opportunities for student leadership. Reach out to any of the following on their listhosts to get involved. This list is not complete. We welcome suggestions for further additions.

	Expression Mode			
Organization	**Lectures with Q&A**	**Breakout Discussions**	**Seminar Discussions**	**Hands-On Work for Students**
The Chicago Forum	X	X	X	X
Parrhesia Program	X	X	X	X
Institute of Politics	X	X		X
UC Dems	X		X	X
College Republicans	X		X	X
The Platypus	X		X	X
Moot Court				X
Debate Society				X
Ethics Bowl		X	X	X
Night Owls	X	X		
Night of Ideas	X	X		X
Global Matters			X	
Doc Films Programming	X	X		

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