

UBC Freedom of Expression Statement – ALTERNATIVE Draft

(Draft Edited by Martin Schulz)

Freedom of expression matters. It fuels what good universities do. As one of the world's foremost universities, UBC must vigorously promote and defend the freedoms necessary for the successful pursuit and dissemination of knowledge.

For centuries, universities have held a special place in society. Universities are the only places in society where things can be radically questioned. Universities can play their special role because of academic freedom. Academic freedom allows us to study anything that can lead us to a deeper understanding of the world. It makes universities places in which curiosity is respected and encouraged. And that is rare in the rest of society, and that is the reason why universities play such an important role. And that is also the reason why universities must continue to guarantee the freedom to express and explore ideas.

Two principal reasons underlie our deep and abiding commitment to freedom of expression. First, pursuing ideas freely and openly moves us closer to truth, allowing all ideas to be criticized and tested, accepted and revised. Universities are communities of scholars where the free and open exchange of thought, belief, opinion, and expression is highly valued because it promotes better knowledge and understanding. Academic discourse that is free and open can lead to progress of thinking and the creation of new knowledge. It is an institutional practice that is central to the mission of academic institutions. It is a method of inquiry which can be extremely powerful in contexts that respect academic freedom and that allow free and open discourse to unfold.

Second, our scholarly community is composed of people with diverse histories and cultural viewpoints while also encompassing a wide array of disciplinary perspectives. This diversity makes universities, and especially UBC, a place unlike other institutions. When all the voices of a diverse university community can participate equally in intellectual exchanges, this provides a rich, vibrant resource that helps in promoting a wide spectrum of expertise and opportunities in the pursuit of excellence. At UBC, we enjoy extreme levels of diversity, and freedom of expression helps us to unleash the power of that diversity by forming ties across vast differences in thinking and cultural background to engage in new forms of collaboration and produce new forms of knowledge.

Our potential for extremely diverse scholarly dialogue should help us make progress on difficult and complex problems. The intellectual richness of the university comes in recognizing alternatives, having contentious conversations, tackling stubborn assumptions, making brash conjectures, discussing uncomfortable facts, and engaging with sharp differences in values and visions. Scholarly work finds its dynamism in this engagement. It is the work that universities must do and do well (and, of course, we have not always done well as the need for truth and reconciliation highlights). Doing it well means holding open the idea that persuasion is still possible, that thought and evidence and reason can lead to solutions for the many grand challenges we face.

The educational benefit of exposure to diverse understandings, views, opinions, and thoughts comes in developing the skills of intellect and character, the inner resources and personal resilience, which allows one to successfully and constructively engage with a tumultuous and at times unsafe world. This necessitates scholarly spaces where critical thinking and incisive reasoning knows no bounds but is allowed to flourish unrestricted by who you are or to which social groups you might belong. The university works assiduously to create a place where people are physically safe. However, when confronting challenging ideas, ideas that question your deeply held beliefs, ideas that you might find noxious or offensive (or discovering that others find your deeply held beliefs noxious and offensive!), it is inevitable and appropriate to feel intellectually uncomfortable, even offended. Fortunately, universities – and especially UBC – can help you to develop powerful skills and intellectual tools that will put you in a stronger position towards the challenges of a fast changing, modern world.