



Provost/Senate Task Force on

# Academic Freedom and Professional Responsibility

**FINAL REPORT**

April 13, 2026

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	1
2. Unified Statement of Principles.....	4
3. Academic Freedom Council .....	8
4. Constructing a Culture of Open Discourse.....	10
5. Professional Responsibilities of the Faculty .....	19
6. Teaching with “Difficult Words” .....	24
7. Institutional Statements and Institutional Neutrality.....	28
8. Administrators and Investigations .....	32
9. Task Force Members .....	34

# 1. Introduction

The Provost and Academic Senate created the Task Force on January 15, 2025. The announcement noted:

Academic freedom, free expression, and open discourse are among USC's core values and essential to advancing the university's educational and research missions. Across the country, those values are being tested in new and unexpected ways, and are sometimes causing significant disruption to university communities.

The Task Force was charged with assessing the state of academic freedom and open discourse at USC and in higher education and considering modifications to university policies, procedures, and practices that could support USC's core values and advance its mission. A word on terminology: in this report "academic freedom" refers to the set of rights held by faculty and students to pursue knowledge and express ideas without unreasonable constraint, as well as the responsibilities that come with those rights. Another aspect of academic freedom, the university's right to govern itself free from external mandates, usually referred to as "institutional autonomy," is outside the scope of the charge.

The Task Force and its working groups met with an array of individuals and groups on campus and externally, including faculty, students, staff, members of peer institutions, and internal and external bodies focused on free expression, academic freedom, and open discourse. The Task Force examined in depth a large number of recent controversial cases around the country related to free expression, academic freedom, open discourse, and professional responsibility to understand where universities have succeeded and failed in advancing their core values. It also examined survey data on the opinions and beliefs of USC students on speech and discourse matters.

Free expression, academic freedom, and open discourse are core principles shared by almost all top educational institutions. They are reflected in our documents, especially the USC Policy on Free Speech, which states:

Our Board of Trustees long ago declared that members of our academic community share the purpose of the humane and critical examination of major issues of social, political, economic, ethical and aesthetic importance which have in the past confronted, and which will in the coming years constantly confront, the society as a

whole. The Board also recognized the responsibility of members of our community to understand the spectrum of viewpoints on an issue, and, equally, to be actively involved in the solution of the problems these issues delineate. For these reasons, the Board mandated that students and student organizations shall be free to examine and discuss all questions of interest to them and to express opinions publicly and privately.

The current state of free expression, academic freedom, and open discourse at USC has some notable strengths and pockets of excellence, but our assessment is that the university could do more to meet its high aspiration on these matters. Many members of our community give USC a middling grade on these issues. They are concerned about whether the university will stand up for academic freedom, free expression, and open discourse. They worry about social or institutional punishment for expressing unconventional views. In surveys and group discussions, faculty and students report self-censorship and describe stifled discussions of controversial political issues in classrooms or avoidance of such issues altogether. Many students have limited exposure to the idea that free expression and open discourse are important for the effectiveness of their education. There are ways we can improve. We have the opportunity to enrich intellectual life on campus, challenge dogmas, spur innovation, and support our students' development as citizens and as critical thinkers.

It is time to reaffirm and recommit to USC's guiding mission. As put forth in our Mission Statement:

The central mission of the University of Southern California is the development of human beings and society as a whole through the cultivation and enrichment of the human mind and spirit. The principal means by which our mission is accomplished are teaching, research, artistic creation, professional practice and selected forms of public service.

The Task Force believes that USC can be substantially strengthened with a sustained and renewed commitment to the core values of free expression, academic freedom, and open discourse. Doing so will enhance our already elite educational programs and support our thriving research and arts communities. Many of the values at stake are also foundational for the functioning of a civil society. Enhancing these values

among our students, faculty, and staff advances USC's goal of working for the betterment of society.

This report contains recommendations in seven broad areas, described in separate sections. This version updates and completes the preliminary report issued August 7, 2025.

## 2. Unified Statement of Principles

We recommend that USC adopt a statement of principles on academic freedom, free expression, and open discourse. The university's existing policies reflect these ideas, and statements regarding them can be found in various documents. We recommend that the Trustees adopt a single foundational document that sets forth in one place the university's principles and why those principles are essential to its mission. Such a document should incorporate and update key principles from existing documents, and then replace those documents.

### A. Existing Statements

The Trustees have previously adopted and updated principles related to these issues. These principles should form the basis of a unified statement. They include the following:

- *USC Policy on Free Speech* (<https://www.provost.usc.edu/policies-and-statements/usc-policy-on-free-speech/>)
- *Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities* (USC Student Handbook 2025-2026, Appendix II.)
- *Academic and Professional Freedom* (USC Faculty Handbook, 2024, 3-B(1))
- *Academic Responsibilities* (USC Faculty Handbook, 2024, 3-B(2))

### B. Draft Statement as a Starting Point for Discussion

#### Principles on Academic Freedom, Free Expression and Open Discourse: Rights and Responsibilities

Academic freedom, free expression, and open discourse are among USC's core values and essential to advancing the university's educational and research missions. The core commitments are:

- 1) Academic freedom is fundamental to the advancement of truth, teaching, research, and the creative arts. It is also central for faculty members to transmit knowledge to students and guide them in developing their knowledge and capabilities. Faculty members have the freedom to conduct, produce, and disseminate research, and the

freedom to create and disseminate creative work without undue constraint; the university does not impose limits on the freedom of faculty to choose their research topics or methods. Faculty members have the freedom to teach their classes and determine the content without undue constraint. The faculty are responsible for deciding what is taught in the classroom and shaping classroom discussion. The faculty are responsible for the recruitment of faculty; appointment and retention decisions should give preference above all to actual and prospective scholarly and teaching accomplishment, and in the arts to actual and prospective creative and teaching accomplishment.

- 2) Academic freedom in teaching, research, and creative work is associated with certain responsibilities, including maintaining appropriate ethical and professional standards, and providing students with the freedom to learn. Classroom instruction and other forms of teaching, in particular, must align with professional standards in the field, as determined by faculty with expertise in the field. The substantive material in a course is expected to reflect accepted knowledge, debates, and lines of inquiry in the field. Instructors should not introduce into their classes controversial material that has no relation to the course subject. Instructors are expected to use pedagogies and modes of instruction required by the university, school, and department. Faculty members owe a responsibility to the standards of their discipline. Teaching and research activities must comply with ethical standards and the law, and not disrupt the ordinary activities of the university.
- 3) USC is committed to the maintenance of an environment of open discourse and freedom of expression. Engaged discussion, lively debate, logical argumentation, and intellectual experimentation are essential elements of the academic process. All ideas, whether they come from the sciences, social sciences, the humanities, or the arts, can be discussed and challenged. No idea is insulated from examination. Respectful engagement with ideas is at the core of USC's mission.

The university does not seek to protect students from ideas they may find unsettling. Education is not intended to make people comfortable but to help them think critically, develop independent judgment, and challenge their assumptions. Trojans should not shy away from the exchange of ideas. Students are encouraged to learn from each other, engage respectfully with those who have differing perspectives, and thoughtfully explore a range of ideas. The university values civility in discourse, and members of the community share a responsibility for maintaining a climate of mutual respect. However, concerns about civility and mutual respect cannot be used as a justification for closing off discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some.

The freedom to express and debate ideas does not mean that individuals may say whatever they wish, whenever they wish. The university may restrict expression and debate that violates the law or that is otherwise incompatible with the functioning of the university. To this end, the university may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression and debate so that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of the university.

- 4) USC supports and fosters an intellectual environment that promotes the creation of knowledge and artistic work, open discourse, and the growth of students. In support of this, the university refrains from public statements or position-taking on political or social debates. This principle of institutional neutrality (or “institutional restraint”) recognizes that if the university were to take a public position on an issue, it would chill campus debate about the issue. Institutional neutrality applies to the schools, departments, and subunits of the university as well. Institutional neutrality also applies to the university’s investment and operational practices. The principle of institutional neutrality does not prohibit the university from making public statements on issues related to academic freedom and free inquiry that threaten the mission of the university.

5) In general, while academic freedom, free expression, and open debate may be limited in certain narrowly prescribed ways, USC will apply these limits in the least restrictive way necessary, and never in a way that is incompatible with the core principles.

*C. Comments*

- The purpose of the unified statement is both to state the principles and explain why they are important. We believe explaining the rationale for the university's principles is as important as stating the principles themselves.
- This draft reflects core commitments that almost all universities have and is not intended to create a new set of principles. It draws from and parallels other prominent statements, including the AAUP, the Kalven Report, and the Chicago Principles. The reason for USC to craft its own statement is to state the core principles in a way that is tailored to the USC community.

### **3. Academic Freedom Council**

The Task Force recommends the creation of an Academic Freedom Council as a joint enterprise of the Provost and Academic Senate.

#### *A. Purpose and functions*

The Council is a faculty body that serves as a champion of academic freedom, free inquiry, free expression, and open discourse (“the principles”) on campus, as specified in USC’s statement of principles, which includes associated professional responsibilities and limits.

The Council has two primary functions:

- 1) To provide advice to administrators, faculty members, and other members of the community in specific cases that potentially implicate one or more of the principles.
- 2) To advise the President, Provost, deans, and other administrators on policies related to the principles.

Although the Council is not an administrative body with the power to direct action, the goal is to create an expectation that administrators consult with the Council before making academic or personnel decisions on specific cases that implicate one of the principles. In addition to offering advice if solicited, the Council may also contact the Provost or deans if it believes that the principles are implicated in an emerging case.

The Council may be a useful body to produce reports to the Academic Senate and Provost on these matters.

#### *B. Members*

The Council is comprised of 5-9 faculty members who serve renewable three-year terms that are staggered.

Members are expected to have expertise in academic freedom, free expression, or open discourse based on written work, public presence, and membership in organizations focused on these topics, among other things. Members without such expertise may be appointed in rare circumstances; they would be expected to educate themselves about the related university policies, law, and key recent cases across the country. Members should

be senior faculty. Both tenured and RTPC faculty are eligible. It is desirable for some members to have administrative experience. Members are appointed by the Provost and Executive Board of the Academic Senate based on a list provided by the existing Council.

### *C. Comments*

- After studying many controversial cases across the country, we have observed a common source of problems related to the principles of academic freedom, free expression, and open discourse: problems often emerge when administrators make quick decisions after consulting mainly a small group of their inner advisors, usually other administrators. We believe that the Council would provide a “circuit breaker” – an additional point of consultation – that would help reduce the risk of hasty decisions, and ensure that a wide array of voices is heard before decisions are made.
- Chairs of academic departments at USC reported to the Task Force that the availability of expert guidance in this area would empower them to address controversies among faculty and students in a manner consistent with the principles.
- Many (most?) of our peer institutions have a faculty body focused on the principles, including Caltech, Cornell, Duke, Columbia, Harvard, Northwestern, Princeton, Yale, UC-Berkeley, UCLA, and University of Pennsylvania.
- Creating this Council is part of the university’s ongoing effort to build an infrastructure of faculty governance. It will play a role in advancing and defending the principles, and bolster the university’s commitment to the principles.

## 4. Constructing a Culture of Open Discourse

### A. Education Initiatives for Students

The Task Force received significant feedback from across the community about the need for more student education and training on fostering constructive engagement on ideas, both inside and outside of the classroom. (The related issue of how to handle “difficult words” in such dialogue is addressed in Section 5). The next recommendations offer suggestions on how to address these concerns.

**Recommendation 3-1: Orientation module.** *We recommend, more specifically, the inclusion of a video module related to challenging conversations as part of new student onboarding. In part it should explain the following: “Over the course of your study at the university, you may encounter topics and concepts that you find emotionally challenging or awkward. You should keep in mind that a liberal education is designed to confront you with ideas that are challenging and at times may raise questions about your worldviews. If you feel challenged by material in a class, and even somewhat uncomfortable with the content, that does not necessarily mean you should be concerned; it may only mean that you are engaging with challenging new perspectives, which is what college is about. If some of this material makes you feel uncomfortable, that is perfectly normal, and we encourage you to discuss it with your professor and friends.” We recommend this module be developed in consultation with the university’s new Academic Freedom Council, and be evaluated rigorously using experimental methods after its introduction.*

### B. University Open Discourse Initiative

After the preliminary version of this report was released in August 2025, the President launched an Open Dialogue Project that is intended to substantially implement the remaining recommendations in this section. For this reason, we have left the core of the following material as in the preliminary report.

We recommend that the President launch a university-wide initiative focused on advancing and building a culture that reflects the principles of academic freedom, free expression, and open discourse (“the principles”). The initiative would consist of a number of related activities, events, and programs.

## *Rationale*

- The purpose of the initiative is to enhance USC's culture with respect to academic freedom, free expression, and open discourse. The initiative will help members of our community understand the importance of the principles for the university's mission, and demonstrate experientially how to live the principles in practice. Academic freedom, free expression, and open discourse often need to be learned and internalized through experience – their value, scope, and application are not self-evident to everyone.
- Third-party survey evidence and the Task Force's extensive outreach across the university revealed that USC's culture with respect to the principles falls short of its aspirations. Section 1 of this report contains recommendations for a unified statement of principles related to free expression, academic freedom, and open discourse. It is important to have a clear statement of principles, but documents alone will not build the culture; USC must walk the walk as well as talk the talk, and it must actively educate the campus community in the principles. This initiative proposes concrete steps to realize those goals.
- In addition to building the culture, the initiative will affirm and bring to life the university's commitment to the principles, build our reputation as a champion of the principles, and establish USC as a leader in advancing the principles and as a model for other universities.
- There are many excellent activities and events on campus that have the potential to advance the principles. Strategically branding and integrating these activities and events will enhance their impact on the culture by amplifying their common relationship with intellectual and civic freedoms and permitting each to reinforce the others.
- This effort has the following goals, all of which require sustained support and consistent amplification by administrators and faculty:
  - Greater confidence in USC's commitment to the principles.
  - Reduced perception of a need to self-censor among students and faculty, both inside and outside of the classroom.

- Robust but respectful engagement with controversial issues both inside and outside the classroom.
- Greater tolerance for divergent viewpoints; productive and scholarly intellectual engagement with, rather than suppression of, heterodox views.

### *Structure and Logistics*

- *Name and branding.* The initiative should operate under an umbrella with a memorable name and talking points. That is, it requires some branding to tie the pieces together. All of the associated activities and events should be co-branded as part of the initiative.
- *Funding.* The initiative would be supported by existing funds from the many campus entities that are already advancing the principles through their events and programs. In addition, we recommend raising a dedicated new fund that would be used to seed additional activities, events, and research across the campus that are proposed by faculty, students, and staff. The existence of the new fund would signal to the community the seriousness of the initiative. The fund should, in our opinion, be at least six figures to be seen as serious. Given the university's financial constraints, it would be ideal if the money was raised externally rather than diverted from existing uses. (If the trustees were to provide financial support to the initiative, it would be an important signal of high-level support.)
- *Director.* The President should immediately appoint a director of the initiative. The director would report to the President and Provost. Having a director from the faculty would send the strongest signal of support. The director would need to allocate approximately half-time to overseeing the initiative. The director also needs staff support, ideally one full-time person to handle routine matters.
- *Duration.* The core of the initiative would include events over the next year, but some elements would continue beyond that. We believe a multiyear plan is necessary – it is unrealistic to significantly impact a culture in a single year.
- *Partners.* The initiative would be led by the Office of the President, but most of it would be conceived and implemented via the various schools, units, and other partners. A broad base of support across USC is essential for this to be seen as a fundamental commitment of who we are as a university. While elements targeted at a very large audience are desirable, it may be easier to reach some members of the community with

small activities that are more narrowly targeted to their interests. Tailoring the initiative to the unique circumstances of each school and unit provides multiple points of access for our students and faculty. Because the initiative is envisioned as a distributed concept, it will be necessary to develop partnerships across campus with units and people that are interested in helping. Potential partners include:

- Academic Senate + interested faculty councils
  - Student government and student organizations (USC Political Union, Political Student Assembly, Trojan Democrats, USC GOP)
  - USC Library
  - USC centers and units (Center for the Political Future, Schwarzenegger Institute, Center for Inclusive Democracy, Center for Excellence in Teaching, Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, Center for Economic and Social Research, Shoah Foundation, USC Capital Campus, Office of Well-Being)
  - Communications office to create a media campaign
  - Student Life and Residential Life
  - Fraternities and sororities
  - Schools and departments
  - Heterodox Academy at USC
- *Support from university leaders.* The Task Force believes that the success of the initiative hinges to a considerable degree on the support of USC's top leaders, in particular, the President, Provost, and deans. Those leaders need to regularly, over the course of the academic year, incorporate the initiative into their talking points, and to articulate the value of free expression, open discourse, and academic freedom to the students, faculty, and staff in their units, and encourage participation in the initiative. They should also incorporate the principles into their managerial actions, and staunchly defend the principles if they are challenged.

### *Elements: Proposed Examples*

- Educational
  - The Task Force believes that in addition to offering events that are available to interested students, the university must attempt to educate all of its students in the importance of the principles.

- The two Writing classes are unique in that they reach all undergraduate students. Moreover, discourse, expression, and rhetoric are an important element of these classes. The Task Force recommends that the university engage the faculty in the Writing program to determine if instruction on the core principles can be systematically incorporated into the content of these classes. We believe that including instruction on the core principles could make these classes even more of a USC signature than they already are.
  - There are also opportunities to educate students on the principles in classes outside the Writing program. To support this, the initiative would provide micro-grants to faculty to develop content focused on free expression and open discourse in their classes.
  - Work with Student Life to include a “bridging activity/event” in undergraduate student orientation that educates about free expression and open discourse.
  - Work with Rossier faculty to advance civics education and conversation across difference in USC supported schools and USC generated K-12 curricula.
- Work with USC Faculty in Residence to have an event in each Residential College, or perhaps a week focused on the principles. Virtually every freshman lives in university housing and this provides an important contact point outside the classroom for students to be exposed to and appreciate USC’s core principles.
  - Democracy. USC’s central mission is to develop human beings and society. An important part of this is to help students develop the capability to function effectively as citizens in a democratic society. Accordingly, part of the initiative should focus on the importance of the principles for democratic society. In today’s polarized environment, issues that do not at first seem political in nature can be drawn into partisan conflict. Understanding how to navigate discourse in such an environment often requires an understanding of political discourse. Differing views need to be articulated, listened to, and engaged with.
  - One of the strengths of USC is that we attract students from around the world. The perspective that these students bring, whether they come from countries that have a democratic system or not, can put the assumptions of democracy into sharp relief. One way to teach students the foundations and scope of the principles is to relate them to other principles and precepts that are more familiar to them. The initiative’s events and pedagogical components can also expose students to enduring tensions

between democracy and the principles and how our society and others have contended with them.

- Create a committee focused on the connection between the principles and democracy. The committee would serve as a critical partner to engage the schools in the initiative.
  - Explore the possibility of programming around democracy-themed days like Day of Democracy (9/15), National Voter Registration Day (9/16), US Constitution Day (9/17), Free Speech Week (third week of October), etc.
  - Create an exhibit in Doheny Library about presidential visits to USC (Special Collections is interested and CPF has the imagery), if it can be themed around democracy and one or more of the principles.
  - George Washington Leadership Lecture Series (USC + Mt. Vernon Library): lecture and panel discussion on free expression in democracy.
  - Internships focused on civic engagement and dialogue through the USC Capital Campus.
- Speaker series with opposing views or heterodox views. This could involve discussions of important ongoing controversies in the sciences and arts, as well as public policy and political issues. Great research institutions lead the discussions and debates in their academic fields. Engaging in free inquiry in one field creates the habit of mind to engage in such inquiry more broadly. The purpose is to educate audience members on existing controversies, to allow audience members a chance to shape or alter their views, and to model civil discussion.
  - Academic and public-facing conferences related to the principles or exemplifying USC's commitment to fostering an environment where viewpoint diversity thrives, even on controversial issues. Include policy makers, and journalists.
  - Work with University Club to host dinner dialogues; use "Living Room Conversations" or "Make America Dinner Again" methods; have Comms record some footage and testimonials at these discussions.
  - Micro-grants to:
    - Faculty for research and writing on the initiative and the related principles.
    - RSOs for e-board training in conflict resolution, conversation across difference, and other topics related to the principles.

- Graduate students for research and writing on the initiative and the related principles.
  - Students, staff, and faculty for projects to champion and teach the principles to others within the campus community
- Exhibitions and discussions related to “controversial” art, including fine art, performance art, music, film, and other art forms. Topics can be historic and current.
  - Structured discussions and training around controversial issues in STEM. Find pathways forward to inform how science is done and communicated for greater public good.
  - Work with Religious Life to include in the “What matters to me” talks on faculty members that can illustrate how the principles advanced their own scholarly and personal journey.
  - Recognize student champions, faculty champions
  - Add a new field called “[name of initiative]” in the USC Event Calendar section labeled “University Priority” so events can be easily tagged and identified as being part of this initiative.
  - Expansion of USC 1st Year Experiences and re-tooling of Dornsife Dialogue course offerings targeting dialogue specifically to ensure maximum enrollment in desirable topics
  - Optional workshops for new and early career faculty, RAs, and staff to help them learn and advance the principles.
  - Introduce open discourse at parent events so that parents understand how exposure to challenging ideas advances their children’s education, and the nature of USC education.

### *Elements: Current Examples*

Some activities and events are already being offered on campus or have been offered in the recent past. Some could be rolled into the initiative, expanded, or interwoven with other elements. Incorporating these elements will strengthen and broaden the initiative at little additional cost.

- Dornsife Academic Culture and Well-Being

- Foundations of Academic Dialogue: evidence-based best-practices guidance for faculty to facilitate effective and respectful dialogue in the classroom and academic spaces
  - Microseminar on Dialogue through Difference offered by Center for the Political Future.
  - Leadership consultation on critical incidents and issues related to effective or problematic interpersonal and group dialogue.
  - Graduate student and faculty training.
- USC Center for the Political Future
    - Fellows program brings high-level Democratic and Republican practitioners to campus to lead study groups and host conversations that include an array of political views.
    - Warschaw Conference and Climate Forward Conference brings Democratic and Republican politicians to USC to model civil discourse.
    - Debate and election night watch parties.
    - Offers training on active listening, conversations across difference, identifying misinformation, and how to engage civically between elections.
    - Film screenings, panel discussions, coffee talks, pizza and politics, and more – all geared to highlight divergent views and bring people together in respectful dialogue.
  - Center for Excellence in Teaching. CET has produced a number of curriculum and best practices guides, provides training, and consults with faculty about discussing controversial issues in the classroom. If rolling this into the initiative, the content materials should be supplemented with additional materials focused on the principles, perhaps developed in conjunction with this Task Force or the proposed Academic Freedom Council.
  - Center for Inclusive Democracy . Research elections, voting behaviors, and electoral participation within California.
  - Rossier School of Education. Initiative to advance civics education in K-12. This could tie into the initiative to the extent that civics education includes instruction on the importance of open discourse and free expression in American democracy.

- USC Athletics. Collaboration with USC School of Dramatic Arts to perform vignettes about conflict and dispute resolution.
- Other. Dance, Pharmacy, Keck, Institute on Inequalities in Global Health, Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership and Policy, Center on Public Diplomacy, and other departments/centers have held events and programs around open dialogue and free expression of ideas.

### *C. Comments*

In order to assess whether, and to what extent, the initiative is actually building the culture as intended, we recommend that the university empower a team of faculty members with the relevant expertise to design and implement carefully designed surveys and other assessment techniques before and at the end of the year. These assessments would use scientific methods to estimate the effect of the initiative, or the effect of individual parts of the initiative. While dramatic shifts in tolerance attitudes might take longer to develop in response to changes in messaging and culture, this team will gauge familiarity with the initiative, understanding of its purpose, and other related aspects of the intellectual climate, such as belief in the administration's support for the principles and perceptions of the need to self-censor. Longer-term supplementary assessments can include comparing USC FIRE rankings before and after this initiative; qualitative interviews and assessment from students, staff, and faculty; studies of how curriculum and pedagogy have evolved over time. The Task Force has prepared an initial draft survey and has obtained IRB approval. We would need to partner with Student Life to be able to contact students.

## 4. Professional Responsibilities of the Faculty

The Task Force recommends that the university adopt a written policy on professional responsibilities through the Faculty Handbook. Some content to this effect is already included, and that material should be incorporated. The policy's key elements would include the following.

### *A. General*

Universities are conducted for the common good; the common good depends on the free search for truth and its free expression (AAUP 1940). For that reason, faculty members are granted significant freedom in the exercise of their academic responsibilities. This includes teaching, research, and creative and clinical work. Academic freedom is coupled with professional responsibilities. These responsibilities condition and shape the exercise of academic freedom when applied to teaching, research, and creative and clinical work to ensure that such activities advance the mission of the university.

### *B. Baseline Responsibilities That Are Understood*

Some professional responsibilities are understood and do not require detailed statement or enumeration.

In terms of teaching, examples of baseline responsibilities include: meeting class sessions as scheduled, timely grading, adhering to university exam policies and schedules. There is also a general expectation of professional competence in pedagogy and subject matter expertise, which informs the syllabus, class preparation, the conduct of class sessions, the evaluation of student learning and appropriate feedback to students.

In terms of research and scholarship, examples of baseline responsibilities include: complying with contractual provisions established by funding authorities, adhering to ethical standards for experiments, prohibition of scientific misconduct and fraud, giving due credit to the intellectual contributions of others, reporting and managing conflicts of interest and so forth. Many of these responsibilities are specified in other documents (See Faculty Handbook; Integrity and Accountability Code).

In terms of clinical practice, examples of baseline responsibilities include: providing high-quality compassionate patient care, adherence to the highest degree of professionalism through actions such as refraining from disrespectful behavior towards

co-workers, patients, and families; maintaining patient confidentiality; and behaving with civility in support of the working and learning environment.

There are also baseline responsibilities that apply in all university settings. Our Faculty Handbook has long recognized that a faculty member owes responsibility to the standards of their chosen discipline, professional and faculty colleagues, students, the university, and the community at large. Examples include: following university policies regarding harassment and discrimination, not interfering with or disrupting university operations, compliance with laws, not appropriating university property, not disclosing confidential information, and so forth. Some of these actions not only violate the underlying norms but also impinge on the academic freedom of others.

### *C. Specific Responsibilities in Teaching*

Instructors are expected to teach the subject matter and content appropriate for their classes. Such teaching is expected to be based on and aligned with the curriculum approved by the university, school, and department. Teaching is the central way that knowledge is conveyed to students and is at the core of the university's mission. Failure to adhere to disciplinary norms has a deleterious impact on the students in the classroom and the university as a whole.

The substantive material in a course is expected to reflect accepted knowledge, debates, and lines of inquiry in the field. Instructors are expected to use modes of instruction and evaluation required by the university, school, and department, such as adhering to scheduled final exam policies and meeting in person with classes that are supposed to be held in person. The primary determination on the appropriateness of an instructor's course content, substance, and pedagogy is to be made by other faculty with relevant expertise, such as a panel of experts in the field.

Instructors are expected to create and maintain a classroom environment that is conducive to learning, inquiry, and engagement. Instructors are expected to behave in a civil and professional manner. They should not belittle or demean students. Instructors should encourage student engagement when pedagogically appropriate.

In classes where consideration of controversial topics falls within the ambit of the course, instructors should not avoid these topics. At the same time, instructors should avoid introducing topics that are unrelated to the course content or learning objectives.

When discussing controversial topics, instructors should endeavor to create an environment of reasoned discourse and bring competing views in the discussion when appropriate. Instructors are not required to treat all perspectives as equally valid but they should expose students to the strongest arguments and most compelling evidence available on competing sides of contested questions and treat the expression of different viewpoints with respect. When students are assessed on material on which there are competing views, students should be assessed based on the quality of their engagement and reasoning.

Some students told the Task Force that they believed some instructors avoided controversial issues that are relevant to the matter being taught. The students conjectured that such reticence could stem from a fear of potential pushback from students. While instructors enjoy broad discretion in the teaching of their classes, the Task Force encourages all faculty to engage in relevant topics and not shy away from them because they may be controversial.

Faculty members should be cognizant that gratuitous comments in the classroom belittling or demeaning public figures, policies, and viewpoints may make students who support those figures, policies, and viewpoints feel that their views are unwelcome. Such comments create the risk of stifling inquiry and discussion rather than advancing it.

#### *D. Specific Responsibilities in Extramural Speech*

Some faculty members choose to express views outside the university in what may be called the public square. This expression or “speech” broadly defined may take the form of op-eds, blog posts, social media posts, media interviews, testimony before government bodies, creative work, and other forms. Such extramural speech largely falls under rules and regulations concerning free speech, not academic freedom. Faculty members have substantial latitude in expressing such views. In most cases, the university by law and policy may not subject faculty members to discipline for their extramural comments.

A few specific types of speech do not fall under freedom of speech protection. These include statements that incite or produce imminent lawless action, true threats, defamation, fighting words, obscenity, fraud and perjury, and speech used as an integral part of a crime. Although these categories of speech are often undesirable, and they may be actionable in a court, the university will not sanction faculty members for such speech

unless it materially affects the faculty member's ability to be an effective teacher, conduct research, create art, or perform clinical services.

Although faculty members have significant latitude to express themselves in the public square, the university strongly encourages faculty members to keep in mind that they are part of a larger enterprise, and to exercise appropriate judgment in their public speech, as befits their roles as teachers, scholars, artists, and clinicians. When speaking extramurally, faculty members should take into account how their speech will affect their ability to teach, in particular, whether it will inhibit open discourse in the classroom. They should also take into account that public controversies that arise from ill-advised, inflammatory, or inaccurate speech may do damage to the university. Although such comments are permitted and not subject to university discipline, faculty members should give some thought to the potential ramifications of their public expression for the university in terms of students, parents, patients, donors, partners, and other stakeholders.

Faculty members are prohibited from public speech that discloses confidential information or identifies and demeans individual students. Such actions violate others' rights and interfere with the operation of the university.

It is possible for a faculty member's public comments to raise questions about the faculty member's ability to teach and grade in an effective and fair manner. Teaching assignments are made by administrators and, as a general matter, faculty members do not have a right to teach any particular course or set of courses. That said, faculty members should not be removed from a teaching assignment based solely on their public statements because that would infringe on their speech rights.

If there are questions about a faculty member's ability to teach and grade in an effective and fair manner, the faculty member's public statements may be considered as part of a broader pattern of evidence but it cannot be the only evidence. Administrators are encouraged to consult the Academic Freedom Council if a faculty member's external speech plays a role in determining the faculty member's suitability to teach. If the relevant administrator determines that a faculty member is not capable of effectively or fairly teaching a class, the faculty member's teaching assignment and workload may be adjusted, the faculty member's instructional performance may be monitored; and the faculty member may be recommended to seek advice to mitigate the concerns.

When speaking in the public square, faculty members must take concrete steps to ensure that their views are not perceived as representing the position of the university or any of its academic units. It may not always be possible, but when feasible and within reason, faculty members should state that they are not speaking on behalf of the university, such as when publishing op-eds or signing open letters. If a faculty member speaks using a social media platform, the platform should not contain university branding and should contain appropriate disclaimers. The university may not require faculty members to report their extramural speech or political activities to the university in advance or after the fact.

A faculty member's speech rights extend to political speech and activities, as their responsibilities include clarifying that they are not institutional representatives. There are special rules for faculty members that run for political office (Faculty Handbook 3-G).

Faculty members are free to comment on and criticize the university, subject to the prohibitions above regarding confidential information and disrupting university operations.

### *E. Enforcement of Professional Responsibilities*

An important principle of academic freedom is that issues regarding the appropriateness of an instructor's pedagogy and content should primarily be resolved by subject matter experts in the instructor's area, for example, other faculty in the department. In general, issues of this nature should not be resolved by administrators without meaningful faculty consultation.

## 5. Teaching with “Difficult Words”

The teaching of some subjects presents a distinct challenge in that it involves the use of words, phrases, images, or situations that carry significant historical and emotional weight, and in some cases, the use of which are considered socially unacceptable. We call these “difficult words” for short. The N-word is one example, which appears in American literature, but there are examples across a wide array of fields, such as the word “obesity” which is a technical term in some scientific fields but may be perceived as pejorative in other parts of the culture.

Teaching a class in which these words naturally arise can be difficult for instructors and students. While potential controversies associated with difficult words may tempt instructors to avoid them entirely, we believe that would be a mistake, just as it is a mistake to avoid controversial subjects. If consideration of difficult words is important for the learning objectives of the class, avoiding them would be a disservice to students. Education involves challenging preconceptions and pushing the boundaries, which often means an intellectual journey outside of one's comfort zone. Indeed, effective pedagogy can teach students how to engage in reasoned analysis when confronted with opposing arguments in areas they may feel strongly about.

A concern with the use of difficult words in the classroom is the possibility that it may impair learning. We believe there are ways instructors and students can constructively engage with difficult words so that learning is not impaired. Our recommendations offer suggestions to instructors, students, and administrators on how to manage teaching with difficult words to ensure effective student learning. At the same time, instructors should be careful not to introduce difficult words where they are not necessary for the subject matter. There is little pedagogical benefit from using provocative language that is not required by the subject matter.

Successfully navigating such potential challenges is important for the university's educational mission. Moreover, teaching students how to navigate these situations provides valuable training for handling difficult situations in their lives generally.

### *A. Instructors*

Some instructors have not been trained in leading discussions involving difficult words. Others may be unaware that certain words are difficult in the eyes of some

students, sometimes because the culture has evolved and the words have taken on new associations. For example, an instructor from outside the United States may not be familiar with the resonance or connotations of certain words in American culture. Similarly, American instructors may lack familiarity with the cultural norms and assumptions of their non-American students. Instructors should be aware that some students may feel that difficult words are being directed at them, even if they are not.

The university currently provides resources to help instructors deal with these issues through the Center for Excellence in Teaching (CET) as well as other sources. Additional resources are available through outside organizations, such as Heterodox Academy and FIRE. CET can arrange workshops for small groups or departments, and can provide one-on-one consulting. Many faculty have worked with CET over the years and found it helpful.

For classes with difficult words, the instructor is responsible for explaining the focus of the class, the pedagogical approach, and the expected norms of classroom discussions. We recommend that the explanations be provided verbally by the instructor at the outset of the class. The goal is to avoid unnecessary surprises and at the same time reassure students that the content will be handled in a pedagogically appropriate way.

At the same time, instructors should be cautious about excessive use of so-called trigger warnings. Evidence on the effect of trigger warnings does not consistently show they are helpful, and some recent studies suggest that they can be harmful by heightening anxiety and elevating the perceived stakes of a discussion. The decision on whether to include such warnings rests with the individual faculty member teaching the course. We encourage instructors to approach trigger warnings with reasoned intent and not assume that either their benefit or their harm has been conclusively demonstrated.

We emphasize that here we are addressing the problems that arise through the use of certain words as distinct from difficult ideas. Education often requires introducing students to ideas that they may find unsettling. As discussed in the prior section of this report, instructors and students are expected to discuss such ideas directly, openly and respectfully.

**Recommendation 5-1. CET Advising.** *We recommend that CET include the topic of introducing and contextualizing controversial course materials as part of its suite of*

*individual program-level consultation offerings. This could include advice on developing syllabus language.*

## **B. Students**

Some students may not have experience with or may not have been instructed in how to participate in discussions that involve difficult words. Others may simply be unaware of norms regarding certain words. This could be a problem for non-American students when discussing words with distinct American connotations, as well as for American students when discussing words with distinct non-American connotations and applies more generally for words and topics that have culture- or country-specific connotations, such as depictions of the prophet Muhammad. Students may believe in good faith that complaints are justified when material makes them feel uncomfortable or arguments are presented with which they strongly disagree.

**Recommendation 5-2. Outreach to students.** *In general, we recommend that the university consider alternative ways to reach out to students and educate them about conversations about difficult words. This is important not only for the university's educational mission, but also to prepare students to function effectively in the workplace and broader society once they graduate. Indeed, this is consistent with a general theme of our report that the university must make it an ongoing part of its activities to educate its members about matters relating to discourse. This is related to our recommendation below for an open discourse initiative.*

**Recommendation 5-3. Student Handbook.** *We recommend that the material related to difficult words in the Student Handbook be reviewed and if appropriate updated, in consultation with the Academic Freedom Council among others.*

## **C. Complaints and Investigations**

Some faculty members told the Task Force that they worry that students sometimes file complaints against faculty members for employing difficult words on hate speech grounds. Even if the instructor's behavior was appropriate and the investigation concludes that no policy was violated, the instructor may be forced to suffer the uncertainty and stress of an investigation. This may lead the instructor to avoid certain topics in the first place.

**Recommendation 5-4. Create and publish a document describing the nature and disposition of cases involving difficult words.** *In conversations with investigators, the Task Force was told that very few such complaints lead to a full investigation, and most of them are quickly resolved. Our understanding is that only a very small fraction of complaints relating to difficult words end up in a formal investigation, and many of these are egregious instances in which the difficult words were not closely tied to the subject matter. We recommend that the relevant investigative office prepare an annual report summarizing the caseload and disposition related to difficult words, with comments on any emerging issues and patterns that have appeared. This report should be distributed to the departments that teach the subject matter in question. The purpose is to ground faculty concerns in an accurate understanding of university investigations.*

**Recommendation 5-5. Workshops and conversations involving investigative offices and key departments.** *The university's various offices that are connected to investigations on occasion meet with impacted schools or departments to discuss their practice and best practices in the classroom. We recommend that units that routinely encounter difficult words in their subject matters periodically schedule workshops or other engagements with the investigative offices to help instructors understand best practices and common mistakes, and to allay some concerns about investigations that may not be merited.*

## 6. Institutional Statements and Institutional Neutrality

On August 20, 2024, the University’s President, Provost, and Senior VP for Health Affairs issued a letter stating their intent “as individual leaders [and] on behalf of the university” not to “post statements or take sides in political or social debates.” The reason, stated in the letter, is that:

“[S]uch statements can silence people, be seen as speaking for everyone, and lead to unintended consequences and seeming orthodoxies that stifle people’s rights of free speech. This runs counter to our responsibility to support viewpoint diversity, open and impartial debate, free speech, and safety in all aspects of university life.”

By longstanding practice, subunits of the university (schools, departments, etc.) are prohibited from making public statements that suggest they are speaking for the university, school, or department. Also by longstanding practice, the university prohibits the use of its logos, graphics, and websites to express political positions. See [USC policy on “Political Activity.”](#)

The Task Force endorses this approach, often called “institutional neutrality,” and its rationale. We note that many other universities follow such a policy, often referring to the [Kalven Report](#) produced by the University of Chicago in 1967. Institutional neutrality is included in the proposed Unified Statement of Principles in Section 1 of this report.

**Recommendation 6-1.** *We recommend that the Board of Trustees adopt a formal policy of institutional neutrality.*

At present, the university’s commitment to institutional neutrality exists in the form of a letter from the President, Provost, and Senior VP Health Affairs. Because administrators change over time, the Task Force believes it is important for these principles to be adopted more formally and incorporated into the university’s governance documents. Our suggested approach is to encode them in a general Statement of Principles along the lines suggested in Section 1 of this report. We also recommend that the university’s leaders clearly communicate the university’s position on institutional neutrality to subunits, centers, and institutes.

## *A. Exceptions to Institutional Neutrality*

The principle of institutional neutrality, as stated in the Kalven Report, does not prohibit the university from making public statements addressing public issues that “threaten the mission of the university and its values of free inquiry.” We view “free inquiry” as including issues of academic freedom. To avoid any doubt on this matter, we suggest that the university’s policy expressly allow the university to speak publicly on issues related to academic freedom. These specific instances aside, there should be a “heavy presumption against the university taking collective action or expressing opinions on the political and social issues of the day, or modifying its corporate activities to foster social or political values, however compelling and appealing they may be” (again, from the Kalven Report).

This does not preclude the university from engaging with government officials on routine matters related to the university’s operations, such as zoning laws, traffic lights, and so forth, or from lobbying on issues related to university operations.

In all cases, the decision whether an issue is sufficiently important and meets the narrow set of exceptions belongs to the Board of Trustees and, under delegated authority, the president of the university. No other university official or faculty member is authorized to make this determination without express delegation from the president of the university.

## *B. The Scope of Institutional Neutrality*

Faculty in the course of their research and creative work may explore disciplinary interests broadly. Indeed, scholarship and art are sometimes most impactful when they touch on issues that affect the polity. This engagement with crucial matters is at the heart of academic freedom. Faculty also retain the ability to speak as individuals extramurally on any matter of concern, and to advocate for political and policy positions, whether or not within their disciplinary expertise.

Institutional neutrality reflects a commitment by USC’s Board of Trustees and its top administrators. As mentioned above, this also applies to subunits of the university – schools, departments, centers, and other bodies, as well as their top administrators – as a matter of university policy. The Task Force supports this policy. Were any of these subunits to issue public statements on political and social issues, it would inhibit open dialogue on

campus and especially the freedom to dissent, just as statements by the university and its top leaders would do.

### *C. Statements by Centers and Institutes*

Centers and institutes often exist to translate research into practice and to inform policy. A center's mission may be to use research to improve policy outcomes in its area of focus. As such, it is the nature of some centers and institutes to address and in some cases make recommendations on public policy questions. Institutional neutrality does not prohibit them from producing research that offers policy recommendations within their area of expertise, but they must take steps to ensure that such recommendations are not seen as representing official positions of the university or the center, but rather as recommendations of the report's authors.

To this end, we recommend that the university adopt a policy that when centers and institutes issue reports, op-eds, or other policy-related content, that material must be ascribed to the authors or creators of the material, and not issued as an official position of the center or institute. Most centers and institutes appear to follow this practice already. It should also be noted that the views do not represent an official position of the university or the center. For example, a center may issue a research report commenting on a proposed law that is currently under consideration, and offer a recommendation for or against it, but the report should have an explicit author and note clearly that the position expressed is the author's and not the center's official stance.

Moreover, it is expected that recommendations from centers and institutes are grounded in research, reflecting the university's position as a research institution and not an advocacy institution (with the exception of issues related to academic freedom as noted above.)

Section 3-H(5) of the Faculty Handbook states that faculty members should avoid statements that might seem to commit the university or an academic unit to an endorsement unless expressly authorized by the provost. This has long been understood to restrict political comments by top administrators, such as deans, even if they state that they are speaking in an individual capacity, because their positions make it difficult to separate their views from those of the university. The same logic suggests that directors of centers and institutes should avoid such statements as well. The provost may grant

exceptions to center and institute directors in cases where complete avoidance of public statements may be impractical given the mission of the centers or institute.

**Recommendation 6-2.** *Because of the importance of translational research in many centers and institutes, we recommend that the university produce a document explicitly describing the university’s policy with regard to public statements by centers and institutes and their administrators. The policy should explicitly state that policy recommendations issued by centers must be attributed to their authors and not to the institution itself, subject to the limited exclusions associated with institutional neutrality. (This may be part of the statement mentioned in Recommendation 1.)*

#### *D. Investment Policy and Operational Practices*

Over the years, various groups have called on universities not to invest in companies or countries for political or social reasons. As noted in the Kalven Report, heeding such calls would be a political statement, and would be inconsistent with institutional neutrality. Such divestment from a country or set of companies would be a political statement, designed to express the university’s disapproval for the practices of that country or set of companies.

This principle also extends, beyond investment, to any of the university’s operational practices. Institutional neutrality requires, again quoting from the Kalven Report, that the university not modify “its corporate practices to foster social or political values, however compelling they may be.” Institutional boycotts are also incompatible with institutional neutrality.

**Recommendation 6-3.** *We recommend that the university declare its intention not to base its investment or any other operational policies on political or social objectives, and conduct a review of its existing policies to ensure that its current investment policies do not reflect such objectives.*

The university’s investments should be managed to maximize the long-term return from the assets entrusted to the university. If political considerations affect the returns of certain assets, then the investment policy may take those factors into account as part of the fiduciary responsibility to manage returns.

## 7. Administrators and Investigations

In the course of its investigations, the Task Force heard faculty repeatedly and forcefully express concerns that if a controversy occurred, administrators would “throw them under the bus.” Many mentioned instances at USC when administrators made hasty decisions and did not support faculty and sometimes publicly undermined them with students; these instances cast a long shadow on how faculty perceive university administrators. The Task Force did not independently verify the validity of these complaints, but is confident that at least some of them have merit, and there are many well documented instances at other universities across the country.

We believe this concern about lack of administrative support is an important factor leading to instructor self-censorship in the classroom, and contributes to a general chilling of discussion across campus. It may be that the widespread belief that administrators will not support faculty in the face of student accusation is exaggerated, but even if it is, the mere perception of lack of support can lead to avoidance of pedagogically important content and degrade the quality of the students’ education. This reasoning adds additional force to Recommendation 1 from the prior section.

**Recommendation 7-1: Expressions of administrative support and consistent actual support.** *We recommend that administrators – deans, vice deans, and chairs – become more vocal in reassuring faculty and ensuring that they will provide support for faculty when they teach their courses within the standards in the field. This needs to be said repeatedly and on an ongoing basis. At the same time, administrators must work hard to ensure consistent application of university rules in the face of student complaints. This can be done in part by consulting with the Academic Freedom Council on difficult cases before taking actions or making public statements.*

It may happen that students raise concerns about a faculty member’s conduct via social media. Students should be encouraged to raise their concerns with university administrators who have oversight of the instructor, such as the department chair, before making public comments because erroneous public comments can cause irreversible harm both to the faculty member and to the university. Administrators should not remove instructors from class or otherwise discipline them based solely on social media unless there is reasonable information about a threat to safety.

**Recommendation 7-2. Administrator consultation with Academic Freedom Council.**

*Administrators should be urged to consult the university's Academic Freedom Council before making any decisions in such cases because precipitous actions can cause irreversible harm.*

## 8. Task Force Members

### *Co-Chairs*

- **John Matsusaka.** Charles F. Sexton Chair in American Enterprise and Professor of Finance and Business Economics; Marshall School of Business
- **Robert Rasmussen.** J. Thomas McCarthy Trustee Chair in Law and Political Science and Professor of Law; Gould School of Law

### *Task Force Members*

- **Velina Hasu-Houston.** Distinguished Professor of Theatre in Dramatic Writing; School of Dramatic Arts
- **Anna Krylov.** USC Associates Chair in Natural Science and Professor of Chemistry; Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences
- **Morris Levy.** Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations; Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences
- **Etan Orgel.** Professor of Clinical Pediatrics; Keck School of Medicine
- **Dan Pecchenino.** Professor (Teaching) of Writing and former President of the Academic Senate; Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences
- **Neeraj Sood.** Professor of Public Policy; Price School of Public Policy
- **Miki Turner.** Professor of Professional Practice of Journalism; Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism

### *Advisory Members*

- **Andrew Guzman.** Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs
- **Rima Jubran.** Immediate Past President, Academic Senate
- **Martin Levine.** Vice Provost and Senior Advisor to the Provost
- **Kamy Akhavan.** Managing Director, USC Dornsife Center for the Political Future