

Ontario Universities and Colleges Coalition

Statement on government-mandated free speech policies

Ontario's universities and colleges are vital spaces where a culture of rich academic debate and free expression should be fostered. Core to the mandate of our postsecondary institutions is the advancement of knowledge, and that requires our campuses to be places where all community members have the right to speak their minds and respectfully challenge each other intellectually. Faculty associations, labour unions, and student unions deeply believe in these rights, and will continue our collective work to uphold them.

There is no free speech crisis on Ontario campuses. This is an ideological fiction advanced by the government to justify interference in the academic governance and autonomy of Ontario's universities and colleges. It is telling that the government did not consult with any sector stakeholders before announcing the new requirement for campus "free speech" policies and disciplinary measures tied to possible cuts to university and college funding.

This intervention is not just unnecessary, it is harmful. These policies will actually limit the rights of faculty, staff, and students to express themselves and jeopardize the quality of student education and research:

- Threatening to discipline students, staff, and faculty actually limits expression rights on campus, especially for systemically marginalized groups. Members of the campus community may be discouraged from speaking up for fear of being disciplined.
- Threatening to withhold financial support or recognition from campus student groups suppresses student voices and denies students their right to freedom of association.
- Threatening budget cuts for already underfunded universities and colleges undermines their academic integrity and jeopardizes education and research quality.
- Requiring universities and colleges to develop free speech policies undermines institutional autonomy and overrides important protections that allow our postsecondary institutions to operate free of political interference from government.



Given these many real dangers, we encourage the Ontario Government to reconsider this directive, withdraw their prescribed disciplinary measures, withdraw their threatened funding cuts, respect the autonomy of Ontario's universities and colleges, and support the speech rights of students, staff, and faculty.

Ontario's universities and colleges already have policies in place that govern campus speech, and it does not make sense to require them to be arbitrarily rewritten just to conform to a set of principles developed by a private university in the United States.

There are improvements that could be made to foster stronger speech freedoms on our campuses. The rise of precarious academic work means that a majority of university and college faculty cannot depend on the academic freedom protections afforded to tenure-stream faculty and, although university faculty and students are represented on institutional decision-making bodies, representative collegial governance bodies are lacking at Ontario's colleges.

However, the government's new free speech policy requirement will do nothing to address these issues or foster better speech on campus. It will only create a more polarized and litigious environment that risks suppressing speech.

Meaningfully addressing the real challenges our campuses face will require postsecondary institutions to embrace collegial governance by adopting more transparent and accountable decision-making bodies that represent all members of the campus community. It is through more democratic campuses that we will ensure freedom of expression and the continued vitality of Ontario's postsecondary institutions.

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