



# Office of the Chancellor

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## UC Davis

Dear UC Davis Community,

I have no doubt that the next few years will be ideologically charged ones for many college campuses across the country. As I said at our [Fall Convocation](#) on “Inspiring Dialogue,” I cannot recall a moment in my lifetime when the discourse of our national community was more vitriolic and polarized. The situation has in no way moderated since then.

While the state of national discourse may be beyond my power as an individual to repair, here I want to address an issue we have faced more than once in recent years on our campus and about which we can make a difference. Because UC Davis is a public university, our faculty and duly registered student clubs are allowed to invite speakers with diverse perspectives to share their views and insights with the larger community. Consistent with our legal responsibilities, we do not screen these speakers based on the content of their views. We have for many years received demands from individuals in our community to ban invited speakers whose views they found objectionable, and those demands have recently intensified. Again, consistent with our legal responsibilities, grounded in the First Amendment to the Constitution, we do not exercise prior constraint on speech.

We understand that controversial speakers may well inspire protest, and we fully support properly conducted protests. Protesters, too, enjoy free speech protections, but like all expression, protest is subject to time, place, and manner restrictions. Unfortunately, at one event last year, protestors shouted down and for a time physically blocked the audience from observing a speaker. Recently, a student club invited a speaker with views abhorrent to many. On this occasion, protestors managed to prevent the orderly entry of ticketed audience members to the lecture hall so that the the speech was cancelled before it could even begin.

I am mindful that some speakers may be extremely upsetting to members of our community, particularly to those who believe they are targets of the speech. I am mindful as well of our own UC Davis Principles of Community as well as the UC Regents’ Principles Against Intolerance. However, I am also vigilant about our obligation to uphold everyone’s First Amendment freedoms. This commitment includes fostering an environment that avoids censorship and allows space and time for differing points of view. Like most places of higher learning and teaching, UC Davis is a community for all ideas, and our campus is committed to ensuring that all members are allowed to freely hear, express, and debate different points of view. In the incidents I described above, we fell short of permitting free expression and exchange of ideas.

Our First Amendment rights are treasures provided to every member of our American community, but those rights do not include the silencing of speakers or blocking of audiences from hearing speakers. When we prevent words from being delivered or heard, we are trampling on the First Amendment. Even when a speaker’s message is deeply offensive to certain groups, the right to convey the message and the right to hear it are protected. This is essential to our values and to how we move forward in the months and years ahead.

Over the winter break, our offices of student affairs and legal counsel developed a Web page, “[Student Expression](#),” to advise students on how to exercise their rights of expression and to get support for a variety of situations. This follows on the community-wide effort we undertook in 2014 to create a Freedom of Expression policy (PPM 400.01): <http://manuals.ucdavis.edu/ppm/400/400-01.pdf>. Students, staff, and faculty will find these resources useful.

In the coming weeks, I will be creating a work group of campus representatives – students, faculty, and staff – and key campus constituents to develop recommended practices and policies to ensure invited speakers can deliver their messages unimpeded. I anticipate the work group will provide its recommendations to me by no later than May 31, 2017.

While our [Principles of Community](#) “affirm the right of freedom of expression within our community” and commit to “the highest standards of conduct and decency toward all,” these are aspirational goals rather than formally adopted best practices or standards. As I have stated before, the campus community’s shared practice of responding to any idea with respectful and thoughtful engagement can help not only to deepen its collective understanding of important issues, but also to heal divisions, harmonize differences, and promote productive cooperation.

Sincerely,

Ralph J. Hexter  
Interim Chancellor