

Ohio Wesleyan University

Policies

Academic Freedom & Free Expression

Free Speech Review Panel

April 17, 2018

The founding charter of Ohio Wesleyan provides that “the University is forever to be conducted on the most liberal principles, accessible to all religious denominations, and designed for the benefit of our citizens in general.” For more than 175 years, Ohio Wesleyan has sought to educate students and enrich society by disseminating knowledge from a wide variety of sources and perspectives. “In the spirit of this heritage,” declares the *Statement of Aims*, “the University defines itself as a community of teachers and students devoted to the free pursuit of truth.”

Ohio Wesleyan has made considerable progress in pursuit of these ideals. In 1951, President Arthur Flemming '27 allowed the Socialist leader Norman Thomas to address students on campus, fourteen years after he was denied permission. In 1963, Ohio Wesleyan resisted opposition from residents of Delaware and extended an invitation to a Communist. “A university by definition and tradition must be a place of free inquiry whether in the classroom, laboratory, or on the speaker’s platform,” asserted President Elden Smith '32. During the Vietnam era, speakers for and against the war, including Lt. General Lewis Hershey, director of the Selective Service System, visited Ohio Wesleyan and were able to voice their opinions even as some students picketed and protested peacefully.

The actions of Flemming and Smith reflect the spirit and promise of Ohio Wesleyan, which strongly supports academic freedom and free expression because they are essential to the University’s goals of imparting and developing knowledge in various forms and enhancing capabilities like critical thinking within the context of values and service. As the *Statement of Aims* affirms, “A liberal education seeks to develop in students understanding of themselves, appreciation of others, and willingness to meet the responsibilities of citizenship in a free society.”

Free expression is the right of all members of Ohio Wesleyan to exercise the broadest possible latitude to speak, write, listen, learn, and challenge, whether it is a scholarly argument, political position, personal opinion, or University policy. Academic freedom relates to political, historical, cultural, social, religious, artistic, and scientific inquiry in all educational activities, including research, publication, and presentation. Free expression also applies in personal communication and all educational venues, including but not limited to the classroom, laboratory, studio, podium, stage, museum, and library.

Academic freedom and free expression pertain to ideas that many or most members of Ohio Wesleyan may consider mistaken, dangerous, and even despicable. Certain opinions may cause emotional distress and have an inequitable impact on different groups or individuals. Yet it is not the proper role of the University to shield them from views they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or offensive. Ohio Wesleyan values the rights, perspectives, and voices of all members of the University community. Faculty, students, administrators, and staff also share the collective responsibility for maintaining a climate of mutual respect and civility. Nevertheless, concerns about mutual respect and civility should never be used as a justification for limiting or suppressing discussion of ideas, however unwelcome, disagreeable, or offensive those ideas may be to some individuals.

Academic freedom does not, of course, mean that members of the University may say whatever they wish, whenever or wherever they wish. Ohio Wesleyan may restrict expression that violates the law, defames specific individuals, constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, or unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests. In addition, the University may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt ordinary activities. These limitations, however, are narrow exceptions; it is critically important that these exceptions never be used in a manner that is inconsistent with the University’s commitment to a free expression of ideas.

The entire Ohio Wesleyan community must also act in accordance with the fundamental principle of free expression. Although members may criticize and protest the views expressed by faculty, administrators, students, or speakers invited to campus, they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to present ideas that they reject or even loathe. The University has a responsibility to promote debate and deliberation of contentious issues – and to protect that freedom if some individuals seek to prevent it.

The *Transcript*, the student newspaper, endorsed the University’s decision to allow a controversial speaker on campus in 1951. “Ohio Wesleyan has confidence in the ability of her students to weigh all facts presented to them, to discuss and compare these facts, and to arrive at conclusions by the process of investigation and selection,” stated an editorial, which added that other universities had erred in limiting free speech. “Are the educators of today going to revert to intellectual isolationism by presenting only one side of questions, or are they going to meet the challenge with the faith and courage necessary to listen to and present to the students the widest available variety of opinions on these controversial questions?”

Ohio Wesleyan faces a similar challenge now. “Educational institutions have an obligation to the students of our country to provide them with a background which will enable them to make decisions on their own in later life,” concluded the *Transcript*. “No one is going to shelter them when they leave college. . . . There is no screening of speakers for mature adults in a democracy.” More than six decades later, academic freedom and free expression remain vital for the University and society because the students of today are the citizens of tomorrow.

Portions of this statement come from the Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago.

