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Chair of the Assembly of the Academic Senate
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University of California
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April 16, 2015

CHAIRS OF SENATE DIVISIONS
DIRECTORS OF SENATE DIVISIONS

Re: Academic Council Statement on Academic Freedom and Civility

Dear colleagues,

At its April 1, 2015 meeting, the Academic Council endorsed the attached Statement on Academic Freedom and Civility drafted by the University Committee on Academic Freedom (UCAF). The statement emphasizes the preeminent value of academic freedom in campus speech, in the context of recent efforts to encourage civil discourse on campus, and concerns that such appeals have the potential to chill free speech. I request that you disseminate the statement to your faculty and make it available on Senate academic freedom committee websites. Council also believes that it would be beneficial to make the statement available for distribution as a supplement to similar statements issued by campus chancellors each fall.

I note that the issue was somewhat controversial on Council, where there were challenges to the view that academic freedom has “preeminent” value in speech on campus, where we have occasionally seen instances of uncivil behavior in demonstrations and interchanges around specific issues. However, Council was persuaded by the argument that free speech can make people uncomfortable for a variety of reasons, and that academic freedom should not depend on the extent to which speech is defined as “respectful.” Concerns about civility are important, and indeed, the statement starts by noting that discourse should always begin with an aspiration to civility, but those aspirations should not trump academic freedom nor constrain one’s ability to express views in an impassioned way.

We hope this Statement will help provide faculty and others on campus with a principled basis for further discussions about academic freedom and civility.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mary C. Gilly".

Mary Gilly, Chair
Academic Council

Encl.

Cc: Provost Dorr
Academic Council
UCAF Members
Executive Director Baxter

UC Academic Council Position on Academic Freedom and Civility
Proposed by the University Committee on Academic Freedom
Endorsed by the Academic Council April 1, 2015

The Academic Senate expresses its support for the tenet that UC campuses should aspire to civil discourse, so long as this tenet is not allowed to operate in practice as a restraint on academic freedom. While the Academic Senate urges that discourse in any context, in or outside the classroom, be respectful of individuals whose viewpoints one may not agree with, the Senate strongly endorses the preeminence of the value of academic freedom.

Academic freedom includes the right of members of the university community to express their views, even in passionate terms, on matters of public importance. That right is a necessary part of what the U.S. Supreme Court has called our “profound national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide-open.”