



Stetson University Adopts Statement Supporting Free Expression on Campus

On college campuses across the country, conversations about race, politics and other issues have become flashpoints in the debate over free speech. Public clashes between ideologies and individuals on college campuses became so frequent that in December 2017 Stetson University President Wendy B. Libby, Ph.D., convened a task force to develop a university statement affirming academic freedom and civil discourse.

Over a Year of Thoughtful Discussions

After more than a year of gathering input from students, faculty and staff, and meetings to discuss the issues, the task force presented the Statement of Principles of Free Expression to Stetson's Board of Trustees, which unanimously approved it.

"This statement puts us out in front of many other colleges and universities in both principle and practice," said Eric Kurlander, Ph.D., professor of history, who presented the statement to trustees with Sven Smith, Ph.D., assistant professor of sociology, and Kevin Winchell, associate director of Stetson's Center for Community Engagement.

Navigating Challenging Conversations

"If you've been following some of the national news, there are many campuses that have really struggled with navigating these challenging conversations about race or religion or politics or privilege," Winchell said.

“Students often feel like they’re silenced or marginalized because they don’t know how to approach these challenging conversations, but they really want to talk about them because they care about these issues.”

President Donald Trump is expected to sign an executive order today that addresses free speech on college campuses. Earlier this month Trump said that he would issue the executive order “requiring colleges and universities to support free speech if they want federal research dollars.” His statement came during the Conservative Political Action Conference.

Important, Not Easy

“We greatly appreciate the work and time Eric, Sven and Kevin put into this, as well as Peter Lake and others at the College of Law,” said Libby. “It is extremely important to the entire Stetson community, but it was certainly not easy, and the final statement is a reflection of the thoughtful discussions they have had.”

Members of the Stetson task force say the university has an academic mission and a civic responsibility to teach students how to engage in challenging conversations about race, religion, politics, gender, class and privilege—with civility.

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“It’s not just a contract with our students. It’s also a contract with our society and with our democracy,” Winchell said at a recent staff meeting on the DeLand, Florida, campus. “We have a civic—almost moral—responsibility to ensure we’re inculcating these habits of citizenship.”

The Marketplace of Ideas

The statement says the university adheres to “the principle that debate and dialogue should not be suppressed because some members of our University community or individuals outside the University consider such views to be politically harmful, offensive, politically incorrect, or pernicious.

Expressed views are open to criticism, debate, and condemnation. Open debate and

dialogue is a natural part of the marketplace of ideas. Hence, attempts to suppress or punish protected expression or speakers are anathema to the free expression necessary for intellectual and cultural growth.”

Even before the statement received final approval from the Board of Trustees, Lake, professor of law and a member of the task force, was already experiencing the benefits of such a document.

Lake invited Judge Kenneth Starr to be the guest speaker at Stetson’s annual National Conference on Law and Higher Education in Clearwater Beach. Judge Starr’s presentation was warmly received at the event, but did receive a handful of comments on digital media.

“I invited Judge Kenneth Starr to speak at my national conference and...there were some

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folks outside the College of Law who criticized that choice and I felt that the Statement (of Principles of Free Expression) supported my institution to offer broad programming with a variety of ideas,” Lake explained.

Having a Broader Conversation with Civil Boundaries

“Having a statement like that is a platform for discussions about bringing more diverse speakers and having a broader conversation with civil boundaries associated with it,” he said.

“We understand that this commitment to free expression necessarily opens our community to discomfort and argumentation,” the statement says.

“However, we believe that exposure to challenging views, even those viewed by some as offensive, is an important part of personal growth and education. The best insights are achieved through dialogue which is civil, intellectual, and respectful of differing views,” the statement continues.

“Nevertheless, without protection for expression that might be deemed objectionable, offensive, or challenging, free expression as a value has little meaning. Therefore, perceptions of incivility should not be used as justification to impinge upon the rights of free expression of our community.”



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