

DRAFT: Statement on Freedom of Expression

Ryerson University Senate

Ryerson University's primary purpose is the pursuit of truth, the advancement of learning and the dissemination of knowledge. To fulfill this academic function, a free interchange of ideas is necessary, and the University must do everything possible to ensure within it the fullest degree of intellectual freedom.

Ryerson is committed to equity, diversity and community inclusion and to freedom of expression. It does not see the idea that free expression and the goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion must be at odds with one another. The university embraces the concept of inclusive freedom which espouses a commitment to the robust protection of free expression, and the assurance that all members – including those who could be marginalized, silenced, or excluded from full participation – have an opportunity to meaningfully engage in free expression, enquiry, and learning.

Freedom of thought, association, and expression are fundamental principles of an open, fair, and inclusive campus, and are core to the discovery, critical assessment, and effective dissemination of knowledge. These freedoms establish conditions necessary for critical thought, and for diverse voices to be heard without the fear of repression or reprisal. They are vital to the creation of knowledge, and to challenging the improper use of power.

Ryerson unequivocally embraces the principles of free expression required in an academic environment. The university supports the expression, testing, and challenging of a range of perspectives and ideas, including those that may be deemed difficult, controversial, extreme, or even wrong-headed.

The Ryerson community will sometimes be divided over ethical, social, and pedagogical obligations. These disagreements reflect the profound differences of opinion that exist regarding the tension between free expression and other fundamental values and principles. The university acknowledges that members of its community will sometimes struggle with these issues and will even voice dissent about the merit of particular speakers or subject matter in advancing intellectual enquiry or critical discourse and dialogue. Ryerson recognizes that at times free expression may harm and/or further marginalize community members from visible and invisible minority groups. In such cases, the university encourages its community members to respond with an educational and intellectual approach that increases awareness and consideration of diverse positions.

When confronted with ideas or viewpoints with which they disagree, community members are free to reject and vigorously contest ideas while still recognizing the right to express or hear those ideas. They may choose to dissent through, for example, participating in debate, hosting alternative events, inviting speakers to express opposing views, engaging in non-violent protests or simply ignoring or boycotting events, but they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe. The development of constructive strategies of debate and dissent contributes to individual intellectual growth and serves as preparation for ongoing civic engagement. The university reaffirms its commitment to creating an inclusive environment for all Ryerson community members, and to providing access to services that support well-being and safety from physical harm.

Some challenging cases of free expression will have to be navigated, but it is not the role of the university to censor speech. To grant the institution such power would set a dangerous precedent. Even if institutional censorship were deemed acceptable in one context, there is no guarantee that such

restriction would be applied fairly or wisely in other contexts, or as power changes hands over time.

The freedom to debate and discuss the merits of competing ideas does not, of course, mean that individuals may say whatever they wish, wherever they wish. The University may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the University. In addition, the University may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of the University. These are narrow exceptions to the general principle of freedom of expression, and it is vitally important that these exceptions never be used in a manner that is inconsistent with the University's commitment to a completely free and open discussion of ideas.

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