



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA SYSTEM

2024-2025 Report on Free Speech and Free Expression Within the University

September 17, 2025

University of North Carolina System
Raleigh, North Carolina

UNC Board of Governors

Committee on University Governance, acting as the designated Board Committee on Free Expression 2024- 25 Report on Free Speech and Free Expression Within the University

I. Executive Summary

This report addresses free speech and free expression at the constituent institutions¹ of the University of North Carolina System ("UNC System" or "the University") for the period of time between July 1, 2024, and June 30, 2025, as required by the [Restore/Preserve Campus Free Speech Act](#) ("the Act"). In preparing and publishing this report, the University of North Carolina Board of Governors Committee on University Governance ("committee"), as the designated Committee on Free Expression,³ was guided primarily by the elements required by the Act.⁴

With the requirements of the Act in mind, this report provides background on and context for free speech and free expression at UNC System constituent institutions.

Specifically, as will be further detailed in this report, the committee found that:

1. The constituent institutions remain committed to promoting and protecting free speech and free expression;
2. Disruptions and interference at scheduled expressive events have been minimal;
3. Constituent institutions have developed and utilized mechanisms for receiving, investigating, and resolving complaints regarding alleged free expression policy violations;
4. The constituent institutions are regularly providing information to campus constituencies about rights and responsibilities associated with expression on campus through policies, training, and other outreach;
5. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), which rates college and university speech policies, has awarded its highest rating to 14 out of 16 UNC System higher education constituent institutions.
6. No reporting constituent institutions have incurred undue financial costs related to security surrounding speakers or expressive events on campus; and
7. Constituent institutions continue to accept the recommendations for improvement contained in last year's report.

¹ Because of the additional protections afforded to K-12 institutions under the First Amendment, the North Carolina School of Science and Math, the University of North Carolina School of the Arts for its high school students, and any lab schools operated by a constituent institution are not included within the scope of the report. Even so, these institutions are expected to comply with Article 36 of Chapter 116 to the extent there is not a conflict with relevant First Amendment jurisprudence applicable to K-12 institutions.

² The Restore/Preserve Campus Free Speech Act was enacted in 2017 as [S.L. 2017-196](#) and is codified in the North Carolina General Statutes as Article 36 of Chapter 116.

³ The Act requires the Board of Governors to establish a Committee on Free Expression. [N.C. Gen. Stat. § 116-301](#) (hereinafter G.S.). Section 10.3 of [S.L. 2018-5](#) ("Current Operations Appropriations Act of 2018") amended G.S. 116- 301 to allow the chair of the Board of Governors to designate a standing or special committee of the Board as the Committee on Free Expression.

⁴ [G.S. 116-301\(c\)](#) articulates specific information to be provided in the annual report. See Section IV. for more information.

In addition to work happening on each individual campus, the UNC System Office continues to maintain and update a webpage dedicated to providing information and resources related to free speech and free expression within the University.

Finally, it is important to note that Section 300.8.5 of the UNC Policy Manual, *Equality Within the University of North Carolina*, was adopted in May 2024 and its implementation is ongoing. Annual campus certifications required by that policy—most recently received as of September 1, 2025—are viewable on the northcarolina.edu website linked [here](#).

II. Background

A. *University Commitment to Free Speech and Free Expression*

As the nation's first public university, the University of North Carolina System affirms its long-standing commitment to free speech and free expression for its students, faculty members, staff employees, and visitors under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and Article 1, Section 14, of the North Carolina Constitution. The University and its constituent institutions protect and promote these freedoms, consistent with First Amendment jurisprudence.⁵ Through its policies, the University has expressly established that no employment decision or academic decision shall be based on the exercise of these constitutional rights.⁶

B. *Restore/Preserve Campus Free Speech Act*

Through statute, the North Carolina General Assembly affirmed that the primary function of the University of North Carolina System and each of its constituent institutions is the discovery, improvement, transmission, and dissemination of knowledge by means of research, teaching, discussion, and debate. To fulfill this function, each constituent institution must strive to ensure the fullest degree of intellectual freedom and free expression. According to G.S. 116-300(2), "it is not the proper role of any constituent institution to shield individuals from speech protected by the First Amendment, including, without limitation, ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive."

The General Assembly has also established several requirements for the Board of Governors, the University of North Carolina System, and its constituent institutions regarding free expression. In response, the Board of Governors has designated a Committee on Free Expression and adopted a University-wide free expression policy which, among other elements, maintains institutional neutrality. A copy of the policy is linked [here](#). Additionally, the University meets its statutory obligations by providing periodic training for institutional officers and administrators charged with responsibilities for compliance with the Act and coordinating campus-based training ("Responsible Officers") and publishing this annual report. A list of current Responsible Officers is available at this [link](#).

⁵ See, e.g., Sections 601, 604, and 608 of *The Code of the University of North Carolina ("The Code")*. See also Sections 101.3.1, 300.1.1., 300.2.1, 700.4.2, and 1300.8 of the UNC Policy Manual.

⁶ See Sections 601, 604, and 608 of *The Code*. See also Sections 101.3.1, 300.1.1, 300.2.1, 700.4.2 of the UNC Policy Manual.

III. Discussion of Free Speech and Free Expression at the University During the 2024-25 Academic Year and Committee Findings

Pursuant to the Act, the University's policy, and the Board's interest in a broad review of free expression across the University, the committee received information from responding constituent institutions in nine areas. The questions and summaries of the institutional responses are provided in the following table.

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QUESTIONS SENT TO THE CONSTITUENT INSTITUTIONS	SUMMARY OF INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES
(1) A description of any barriers to or disruptions of free expression within the constituent institution, including specific incidents and/or particularized complaints.	• No constituent institution reported material institutional barriers or disruption of free expression during the academic year. • Notwithstanding the foregoing, UNC-Chapel Hill, UNC Asheville, UNC Charlotte reported student and outsider gatherings of varying size that resulted in some level of campus protest activities that in a few instances escalated and consequently arrests ensued. All experiences were reported in the news.
(2) A description of the administrative handling and discipline relating to disruption or barriers identified in response to (1).	• In UNC Charlotte's example, disrupting persons left freely upon request. One trespass warning was issued in the first of two instances. • At UNC-Chapel Hill, Chancellor Roberts spoke publicly on the matter, and one arrest was made related to the events of September 19, 2024. Separately, in response to an impending "Week of Rage," UNC-Chapel Hill increased its security measures. • The remaining campuses reported referrals to Student Conduct process, criminal charges, or both.
(3) Identification and description of any difficulties, controversies, and successes in maintaining a posture of administrative and institutional neutrality about political or social issues.	• The responding institutions reported consistently that the work of free expression went on. • The responding institutions consistently reported steady and regular efforts to foster a culture of free expression. • UNC Charlotte's handling of the "Triggered" event is likely a case study on positive approaches to maintaining institutional neutrality. • UNC-Chapel Hill is currently in litigation over its response to the April 2024 protests and violence on campus. • WSSU reported taking appropriate steps to address concerns raised over institutional neutrality in the context of public comments made by WSSU employees. • ECU shared some detailed feedback on how it fielded institutional neutrality concerns raised periodically by campus community members. • WCU noted its well-publicized experience with Accuracy in Media and notes that the recorded now former employee misstated the reality of WCU's commitment to institutional neutrality.

QUESTIONS SENT TO THE CONSTITUENT INSTITUTIONS	SUMMARY OF INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES
(4) Any assessments, criticisms, commendations, or recommendation the constituent institution would like the committee to consider in preparing the annual report.	One campus recommended additional training to ensure Free Speech Responsible Officers are able to maintain their credibility as a resource on campus.
(5) Confirmation of whether the institution fulfilled the University policy requirements to disseminate information about institutional policies during the 2024-25 academic year.	All responding institutions indicated that they had disseminated information as required by policy.
(6) Identification of representative institutional policies that reinforce commitment to free speech and free expression (e.g., academic freedom, tenure regulations, facilities use, etc.).	- Many institutions reported amending or adopting policies, including facilities use policies, student codes of conduct, and student organization policies or referenced back to having previously undertaken those efforts in prior years. - The Board of Governors adopted Section 700.4.4 of the UNC Policy Manual, <i>Policy on Campus Gathering & Related Student Conduct Matters</i>, and many campuses followed suit. That policy is most representative of the proactive steps that the University continues to take to avoid undermining the freedom of expression by confusing expression with violence.

QUESTIONS SENT TO THE CONSTITUENT INSTITUTIONS	SUMMARY OF INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES
(7) Examples of speakers or other events that have been held at the institution during the 2024-25 academic year.	• The campuses have provided a voluminous and detailed report of events spanning the State of North Carolina and topics both controversial and not. A detailed list is available on request—however we note examples below. • Representative examples from UNC-Chapel Hill: On August 27, 2024, Congressman Maxwell Frost spoke to UNC Young Democrats. On October 1, 2024, the Philosophy, Politics, and Economics department sponsored the Abbey Speaker Series, in which Richard Ebeling and Michael Meeropol discussed threats to liberal democracy. On October 21, 2024, Charlie Kirk and Vivek Ramaswamy came to UNC-Chapel Hill for a stop on their “You’re Being Brainwashed” Tour, sponsored by Turning Point USA. On October 31, 2024, a student organization, Sunrise UNC, held a rally on the steps of South Building, demanding that UNC-Chapel Hill end its use of coal-powered electricity. On April 14, 2025, this same group hosted a march down Cameron Avenue ending at the UNC-Chapel Hill Cogeneration facility to protest the use of coal. On February 12, 2025, the College Republicans hosted North Carolina Senator Ted Alexander. The Campus Y hosted several speech-focused events, including “Democracy and Dialogue: Political Partisanship and Free Thinking” and “Light or Liberty: The Cost of Free Speech at UNC.” • Representatives examples from NC State: December 2024 Commencement Ceremony - Rashida Hodge (Corporate Vice President, Data and AI Customer Success, Microsoft); May 2025 Commencement Ceremony - Admiral Daryl L. Caudle (United States Fleet Forces Command); Institute for Emerging Issues Forum - Kendal Bowman (State President, Duke Energy North Carolina); Christopher Chung (CEO, Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina); Phaedra Boinodiris (Global Leader for Responsible AI, IBM); Charles Yang (Executive Director, Center for Industrial Strategy); Shelton Leadership Forum - Lindsey Pollak (author, workplace and career expert)
(8) Identification of communications, trainings, or other educational outreach regarding free speech and free expression that have been provided during the 2024-25 academic year.	• All institutions identified free expression communications, trainings, or outreach that had taken place during the academic year.

(9) Information about security and other costs associated with protecting and affirming free expression on campus.	• Most Institutions report either no or minimal additional security costs associated with expressive events. • Notwithstanding the foregoing, UNC-Chapel Hill reports spending over \$52,000 in additional costs beyond standard staffing. • To their credit other campuses within the UNC System provided law enforcement support to UNC-Chapel Hill without billing for their services.
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As a result of the information gathered, it appears again this year that (1) the constituent institutions remain committed to promoting and protecting free speech and free expression; (2) disruptions and interference at scheduled speaking or expressive events have been minimal; and (3) the constituent institutions continue to work to provide information to various campus constituencies about rights and responsibilities associated with speech and expression on campus through policies, training, and other outreach; (4) the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), which rates college and university speech policies, has awarded its highest rating (“green light”) to 14 of 16 UNC System constituent higher education institutions; and (5) with high profile exceptions, no constituent institutions have reported incurring meaningful additional costs related to security surrounding speakers or expressive events on campus.

IV. Implementation of Past Report Recommendations

Constituent institutions reported a variety of processes and resources that have been introduced or improved to implement prior recommendations.

V. New Initiatives & Committee Recommendations

The committee recognizes that there are always opportunities for improving the University’s commitment to free speech and free expression.

This annual report provides a welcome opportunity to consider options that will demonstrate our Systemwide leadership and action in support of free speech and free expression. The committee therefore offers these recommendations for consideration for implementation by the UNC System Office:

1. Continue to foster opportunities for free speech and free expression among campus communities.
2. Continue to provide training to constituent institution administrators who have transitioned into the Responsible Officer title.
3. Continue to foster a culture of conversation among all stakeholders about the importance of free expression. High repetition of low intensity reminders pays dividends in the way that all campus stakeholders consider the importance of free expression in their daily lives.
4. Seek universal “green” status across the UNC System from FIRE.
5. Monitor implementation of University Policy and answer to the best of our ability specific, concrete questions as they arise in consultation with the Division of Legal Affairs.

V. Conclusion

The committee continues to support the UNC System Office's and the constituent institutions' work and efforts in promoting and protecting free speech and free expression and taking action, when needed, to prevent substantial disruption or interference in scheduled events.

The annual obligations that produce this report effect a culture of periodic "well visits" checking into the health of free expression on our campuses. This report confirms that the transparency and accountability required by the originating legislation are having their desired effect, and the content of this report remains consistent generally year over year.

Accepted by the UNC System Board of Governors Committee on University Governance, the designated Board Committee on Free Expression on September 17, 2025.