



How the University of Wyoming Embraced Open Inquiry

A campus-wide commitment to free expression, open inquiry, civil discourse, and institutional neutrality

Through deliberative governance processes and broad consultation, UW adopted a set of policies designed to reinforce intellectual, academic, and expressive freedoms; institutional neutrality; civil discourse; and merit-based hiring. UW proactively pursued a constructive framework that aligned hiring, policy, programming, and public communication with the university's scholarly mission.

CASE AT A GLANCE

- In 2023, UW adopted a university-wide **Statement on Free Expression, Intellectual Freedom, and Constructive Dialogue**, affirming robust commitments to open inquiry, the free exchange of ideas, and institutional neutrality.
- UW wove the free expression principles into policies and procedures — such as a revised student code of conduct, a new policy on campus demonstrations, and an updated student complaint procedure — to ensure long-term protections for free expression on campus.
- In 2024, UW clarified merit-based hiring expectations by eliminating requirements that job applicants submit statements endorsing particular diversity, equity, and inclusion frameworks — making UW one of the nation's few institutions to voluntarily adopt a full suite of reforms: free expression, institutional neutrality, and merit-based hiring.
- In 2025, to further the organizational improvement plan, the UW president hired a full-time administrator to lead the ongoing efforts and continue to ensure that policies, procedures, and trainings for students and employees properly reflect the UW principles.



Inspired by the Code of the West and Wyoming's unique spirit of rugged individualism, UW advances the frontiers of teaching, research, and creative activity through open inquiry independent from the undue influence of donors, elected officials, ownership interests, or other external parties.

– Statement of the University of Wyoming Principles on Freedom of Expression, Intellectual Freedom, and Constructive Dialogue



The Challenge

Across higher education, campus members began to view speech codes and institutional statements as ways to show emotional solidarity with particular constituencies. Many university policies, student conduct codes, institutional communications, governance procedures, and recommended teaching practices began embracing ideological commitments rather than rational processes that support critical inquiry.

Rather than emphasizing the development of arguments grounded in evidence and scholarly inquiry, students have at times been encouraged to treat the campus primarily as a stage for political activism, in ways that can sideline careful reasoning and open dialogue.

Students and community members can be unaware of their rights under the First Amendment, with many believing that being offended was grounds for violating someone's free speech rights, or conversely, that free speech rights gave one the right to engage in illegal discrimination. Likewise, many tend to be unaware of the rights and responsibilities of academic freedom. These knowledge gaps risk eroding open inquiry and the constructive dialogue it requires by creating the appearance of institutional orthodoxy and chilling dissent.

The Change

The University of Wyoming emerged as a leader by articulating a positive vision for the university's academic culture, rather than merely rejecting problematic practices. Through shared governance, campus dialogue, and careful policy review and drafting, the university:

- ### 1 Adopted a Statement of Principles

The Statement of Principles includes five themes: free expression, academic freedom, intellectual freedom, institutional neutrality, and constructive dialogue. The principles affirm that the university's role is to provide space for vigorous debate — not to shield community members from disagreement.
- ### 2 Improved Policies and Procedures

UW recognized that while inclusion efforts are valuable, the university should avoid any practice that could compel speech or create ideological litmus tests. In order to protect the expressive freedom of individuals, UW committed to refraining from issuing official positions on public controversies, except when such statements are necessary to carry out the University's core functions. Multiple policies and procedures were revised to reflect the commitment to free expression, including the student code of conduct and the procedures for evaluating student complaints against faculty.
- ### 3 Consistently Communicated the Principles

The UW principles are communicated clearly and frequently to all campus community members. Whether through orientation for new students and faculty, **resources for instructors**, **constructive dialogue training** for students and employees, or the **library guide** on free expression, UW's commitment to its principles is visibly woven throughout campus life.
- ### 4 Offered Opportunities to Practice Constructive Dialogue

UW increased opportunities for members of the campus community to approach disagreement through the scholarly norms of curiosity, humility, and reason-giving. Efforts included supporting student bridging organizations, bringing in experts on dialogue and deliberation, altering new student orientation and staff development, and offering microcredentials in constructive dialogue.



The Impact

- UW is more strongly than ever committed to academic and expressive freedoms, and routinely reiterates this commitment to the university community.
- The Statement of Principles has helped cultivate a culture of respectful disagreement and intellectual diversity.
- Institutional neutrality has reduced the expectation that university leaders will make political declarations, promoting a more inclusive climate for all viewpoints.
- Collectively, these reforms strengthen trust in UW's commitment to its educational mission and help safeguard open inquiry across the institution.

Actionable Insights

- 1** Lead with academic values, not political reactions.
- 2** Build consensus through shared governance processes.
- 3** Institutionalize commitments to free expression and open inquiry by embedding them in policies, procedures, and practices.
- 4** Connect the vision for your campus culture to your state's and institution's history.
- 5** Understand that the institution's principles will be tested routinely. Student and alumni groups, external organizations, and others may pressure institutional leaders to violate principles. The more consistent leaders and decision-makers are with their commitment to the principles, the better.

To learn more about how Heterodox Academy is working with members to build cultures of open inquiry on campuses everywhere, see our [website](#).

