

How Western Michigan University Adopted Institutional Neutrality

The HxA Campus Community at WMU was instrumental in enacting institutional-level change on campus

Using HxA's Institutional Neutrality policy model as their guide, Western Michigan University (WMU) joined the ranks of the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, and more than 150 other universities in adopting a policy of statement neutrality, whereby institutional leaders practice principled restraint of public statements on contentious issues.

CASE AT A GLANCE

- In February 2025, WMU adopted new “Guidelines for Stewarding Our Institutional Voice,” formally committing the university to restraint in making statements on public issues.
- The shift was driven by collaboration between WMU leadership and the HxA Campus Community, who drew on [HxA's model statement-neutrality policy](#) to inform the new institutional guidelines.
- The policy strengthens open inquiry and viewpoint diversity on campus by ensuring institutional statements do not inadvertently silence dissenting perspectives.
- HxA's involvement included direct guidance, a campus visit from HxA President John Tomasi, and sustained chapter-led engagement with the President's Cabinet.

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The resources from HxA were helpful as we developed new guidelines for stewardship of our institutional voice. We look forward to fostering a campus environment of robust debate in the future.

- JEFFREY S. BRENEMAN, Vice President for Government Relations and External Partnerships at WMU and co-chair of the WMU HxA Campus Community





The Challenge:

Colleges and universities have faced growing pressure to issue official statements on contentious political and social issues. Although well-intentioned, such statements may imply that there is a campus-approved perspective, effectively chilling dissenting perspectives of community members who hold dissenting views who may fear speaking openly.

WMU's HxA Campus Community and campus leadership recognized this challenge to open inquiry on their campus and sought a principled solution to effect change.

The Change:

In the summer of 2024, WMU's HxA Campus Community raised concerns about institutional statements with university leadership and its impact on campus culture. Soon after, the President's cabinet began studying the issue.

HxA's policy team [wrote directly](#) to WMU President Edward Montgomery in September 2024, urging adoption of a statement-neutrality policy, arguing that HxA's policy "protects freedom of inquiry and expression within the academic community," and "strikes the right balance between maintaining institutional neutrality and upholding the university's commitment to empathy and support for its community."

Drawing on [HxA's policy model](#) and input from the WMU Campus Community, WMU leadership developed their [Guidelines for Stewarding Our Institutional Voice](#), which aimed "to create an environment where all perspectives can be shared and debated freely." The adoption of the new guidelines were [officially announced](#) in February 2025, with President Montgomery declaring, "stewardship of free speech and academic freedom requires that the University must be vigilant in considering whether its actions intentionally or unintentionally inhibit free speech and inquiry across our community.".

THE IMPACT:

- Institutional statements at WMU will only be issued when they directly affect the university's mission, operations, or the well-being of its campus community, in alignment with HxA's policy model.
- The framework for issuing statements is now tied to criteria such as tangible impact, mission alignment and deliberate assessment, helping prevent "message fatigue" and preserve the weight of institutional communications.
- WMU recommitted itself to fostering a campus environment that encourages intellectual debate, freedom of inquiry, and diverse perspectives, understanding that all members of the campus community must feel empowered as individuals to engage in discourse on complex and contentious topics.

ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

1

Organize with other HxA members on your campus or activate your HxA Campus Community to rally behind building a policy of institutional neutrality on campus.

2

Utilize HxA's available resources on institutional neutrality — readings, reports, and policy model — to assist in conversations with administration.

3

Collaborate with senior leadership to present the case: why change matters, what you propose, and how it aligns with the institutional mission.

4

Stay engaged to keep conversations moving toward actual change.

5

Follow the policy adoption with events and messaging to continue culture-building and educate the campus community.

Learn how you can drive reforms that elevate and improve public debate, viewpoint diversity, and the pursuit of knowledge on our [website](#).

