

Report from the Faculty Council Task Force on Free Speech and Academic Freedom

April 2026

Summary

The Task Force on Free Speech engaged members of the university community, groups representing faculty, students, and staff, on concerns about who could exercise their constitutional rights to self-expression. We encourage and promote the ability to discuss topics concerning the university community from individual classrooms to shared public spaces. We emphasize that discussions of restrictions on Free Speech and Academic Freedom lead to self-censorship, inhibit critical inquiry in research and instruction, and implicitly threaten CSU's land grant mission of outreach and service to the state of Colorado. We are building on the work of the 2022 Presidential Task Force which addressed issues of hate speech within the context of the First Amendment, as well as the Engagement Working Group on Academic Freedom, formed within the President's Incident Management Team in April 2025. All three groups share the charge to promote free speech, academic freedom, and the safety (physical and psychological) of students, staff, and faculty. This 2026 Task Force requests that the full Faculty Council present our recommendations to the CSU President and Provost as well as request concrete action steps to address them.

Task Force Recommendations:

This task force was composed of groups with complementary and contrasting interests. As a collective Task Force, we have the following recommendations:

1. The institution should actively promote the open ideals of freedom of expression because all members of the university community are entitled under the First Amendment
2. The institution has a responsibility to ensure Academic Freedom which encompasses teaching, research, extension, engagement, and service. The Academic Faculty and Administrative Professional Manual (section E.8.f), identifies the protection of academic freedom as "the major purpose of the University Administration."
3. Any process for revising any policy concerning Free Speech must be made transparently and through shared governance, with meaningful participation from all stakeholder groups: faculty, staff, and students.
4. Any policy concerning Free Speech should clearly designate
 - a. the institutional roles or positions responsible for defining, implementing, and enforcing the policy
 - b. establish a transparent process for bringing and appealing alleged violations
 - c. ensure that all stakeholder groups—faculty, staff, and students—are consulted throughout its development, not restricted to critical stage or decision points
5. The current policy on chalking is appropriate for campus and upholds the right to free speech. However, we recommend that
 - a. the chalking policy should be consistently applied to everyone

- b. suspected violations of the chalking policy should be addressed in a manner that respects free speech and the physical safety of staff, students, and faculty
- 6. To avoid misconceptions, there should be clear definitions of the following terms in the policies:
 - a. Political Advocacy
 - b. Materially disrupt University operations
 - c. Expressive activities
 - d. Freedom of Expression (with respect to definitions provided in the US Constitution, federal and state laws)
 - e. Personal Speech
- 7. The Academic Freedom policy in the Academic Faculty and Administrative Professional Manual should be revised:
 - a. Academic Freedom currently encompasses teaching, research, extension, and service (Section E.8). This portion of the manual should be amended to include everyone who teaches a class, performs scholarly research or extension work, regardless of primary role or employment position.
 - b. Determinations of appropriate Academic Freedom activity should be adjudicated by academic peers through existing policy.
- 8. There should be clear and consistent application of existing policies:
 - a. The current Free Speech and Peaceful Assembly Policy prohibits overnight encampments.
 - b. The Student Code of Conduct currently permits peaceful expression and prohibits harassment, disruptive, and abusive behavior.
- 9. Add Employee Speech protections to staff, Administrative Professionals and Classified Personnel manuals
 - a. University employees should be able to exercise their Free Speech rights without fear of repercussions. These protections should explicitly prohibit retaliation against employees for engaging in constitutionally protected speech.
- 10. CSU should create or consolidate a central website on Free Speech and Academic Freedom, accessible to all members of the university community, that links to existing policies and relevant campus resources.
- 11. We recommend that the Faculty Council and Administrative Professionals Council move forward with recommended changes to the Faculty and Administrative Professional Manual.
- 12. We recommend that the Faculty Council continue collaborating on Academic Freedom and Free Speech with a working group with members from student groups, Administrative Professionals Council and Classified Personnel Council.

Committee Charge:

Review the current Free Speech Policy and Academic Freedom policy and recommend any changes needed to ensure and enhance academic freedom and the right to free speech at Colorado State University.

April 2026: Faculty Council Task Force on Free Speech

- Determine how, or if, the Employee Speech provisions within the Academic Freedom Policy apply to staff and students at the university, and whether changes to existing policy should be proposed to ensure the rights to free speech for all members of the CSU community
- Determine if the current policy on chalking is appropriate for campus and upholds the rights to free speech.
- Evaluate whether “expressive activities” needs to be defined with the policy or in the manual to ensure rights to expressive activities.

Committee Membership:

Chair: Ray Black, Faculty Council Representative, Race, Gender, and Ethnic Studies

Members:

Ali Raza, Student Leadership, Involvement, & Community Engagement (SLiCE)

Amber Wright, Undergraduate Student Representative

Andrew Norton, Faculty Council Chair (former Task Force Chair)

Ben Gregg, Undergraduate Student Representative

Beth Etter, APC Representative, Director of Communications, College of Liberal Arts

Claire Pickernel, ASCSU Representative

Dale Lockwood, Faculty Council Representative, Biology

David Wolfgang, Journalism and Media Communication

Greg Dickinson, Communication Studies

Jakye Nunley, ASCSU President

Jen Dawrs, Faculty Success

Julia Giron, CPC Representative, Accounting Technician in Chemistry

Karrin Anderson, Faculty Council Representative, College of Liberal Arts

Melinda Smith, Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs

Ricki Ginsberg, English

Rob Sica, Humanities and Social Sciences Librarian

Sammi Milyard, CPC Vice Chair

Sarah Smith, APC Representative, Undergraduate Recruitment Coordinator for Walter Scott Jr. College of Engineering

Scott Michelena, CPC Representative, Facilities Management

Sue Doe, Director of TILT

Susan James, Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs

Victoria Quesada-Stoner, ASCSU Representative

Yoseline Rivera, ASCSU Representative

Committee Work:

The committee met virtually seven times, Jan 21, Feb 2, and 16, Mar 2, 23 and 30, Apr 13.

Background to this Committee:

In February 2025, the U.S. Department of Education issued a “[Dear Colleague](#)” letter instructing universities to cease preferential practices in admissions and to discontinue DEI programs on campus. The Trump administration also began to bring lawsuits against and restrict funding to

select universities allegedly for permitting campus protests they deemed antisemitic. On CSU's campus, concerns had been circulating about activities in campus free speech zones (designated in university policy documents as "Public Forum" areas), specifically those that included controversial political slogans and other communication that may have singled out CSU students or personnel. The possibility of student encampments on campus also raised safety concerns.

In response to this "Dear Colleague" letter, the CSU administration maintained that any organization that was open to all students and/or all faculty/staff could remain in operation. The administration made changes to the CSU website and other communications, removing words and phrases that might trigger scrutiny. Stipulations were put on some campus events to ensure viewpoint diversity dictated by the February 2025 letter.

In April 2025, an engagement working group on Academic Freedom was created as part of and to advise the President's Incident Management Team (IMT). In July, they forwarded a letter to the IMT (see [Letter to IMT](#)) with several recommendations. This working group did not receive any response from the IMT. The group met from April until November when it was merged into this Faculty Council Task Force on Free Speech.

In Fall 2025, the CSU administration revised the Free Speech and Peaceful Assembly Policy (a tracked changes copy of the file is archived [here](#)), using a "fast-track" process that precluded input from faculty, staff, and students. The policy put additional restrictions on student speech, including prohibiting camping on campus and restricting chalking in Public Forum zones to promotional messages by CSU units and student organizations. It also included a new section on employee speech that some faculty members believed infringed on academic freedom. After significant pushback from students and faculty, the policy was rescinded.

After a [federal judge granted an injunction blocking the enforcement of the Dear Colleague letter](#) in April 2025, the Trump administration dropped its appeal, and the ["Dear Colleague" letter was invalidated in February 2026](#).

In 2022, CSU created a presidential task force to address the issue of free speech on campus following a series of conflicts between students and administrators. Interestingly, during that period, the positions articulated by students and administrators were the inverse of the positions each side appeared to take in 2025. After several high-profile incidents of speakers coming to campus and promoting what some have categorized as hate speech, students urged the administration to establish policies that would prevent hate speech from circulating on campus. The administrative response, in that case, was to educate the campus community about the ways in which a public university was constrained by its First Amendment obligations. The 2022 task force produced documents and signage to better educate the university community on CSU's First Amendment obligations and to let members of the community know how they could use their voices to oppose objectionable speech. It also recommended implementation of a "Better Ways of Speaking" Initiative that received support from the administration but was not pursued.

Within this context, in late 2025, this Faculty Council Task Force on Free Speech was constituted to make recommendations to the administration regarding free speech, peaceful assembly, and academic freedom on campus.

Committee Considerations:

The physical safety of community members

- As a land grant institution, the university has a responsibility promote and facilitate students, staff, and faculty to be full participants in the democratic process, which means the ability to speak, to question, and to discuss issues in a respectful and responsible manner.

Relevant Policies and Documents:

- [CSU Fort Collins Free Speech and Peaceful Assembly Policy](#)
- [CSU Fort Collins Freedom of Expression and Inquiry Policy](#)
- [Academic Faculty and Administrative Professional Manual, Academic Freedom, section E8](#)
- [CSU System Official Statements Policy](#)
- [CSU System Policy for Elections, Political Activities, and Colorado Fair Campaign Practices Act](#)
- [Memorandum of Understanding on Academic Freedom](#)
- The College of Liberal Arts website on [Academic Freedom in the Classroom](#)
- CSU “You and Free Speech” [First Amendment](#)