


MEMORANDUM

TO: University Faculty Council
University Staff Council
Student Government Association

FROM: Troy D. Paino, President 

DATE: September 27, 2024

RE: Institutional Statements

The question of whether a university should issue statements on matters of great societal importance but external to its own operations has been a topic of conversation on campuses across the nation. It is an important question, and not new to this moment.

Amid the campus unrest during the Vietnam War and Free Speech Movement, University of Chicago famously embraced the principle of institutional neutrality as expressed in the 1967 Kalven Committee's Report on the University's Role in Political and Social Action:

"...the university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic. It is, to go back to a classic phrase, a community of scholars. To perform its mission in society, a university must sustain an extraordinary environment of freedom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures. A university, if it is to be true to its faith in intellectual inquiry, must embrace, be hospitable to, and encourage the widest diversity of views within its community."

The Kalven Report placed "a heavy presumption against the university taking collective action or expressing opinions on the political or social issues of the day or modifying its corporate activities to foster social or political values, however compelling and appealing they may be."

Thirty-six years later, after the United States invaded Iraq, the University of Wisconsin-Madison issued a brief clarification on its institutional voice amidst that controversy: "The University of Wisconsin does not have a foreign policy." This act of institutional neutrality was based on principle, not cowardice. As the Kalven Report asserted, such a policy is necessary to preserve an environment of free expression and intellectual inquiry. "There is no mechanism by which it can reach a collective position without inhibiting that full freedom of dissent on which it [the university] thrives."

University Faculty Council
University Staff Council
Student Government Association
Page Two
September 27, 2024

Over the past several months, several universities have embraced similar policies of neutrality to preserve their mission of free inquiry. Harvard University did so last spring, and the University of Virginia's Board of Visitors recently endorsed a presidentially appointed committee's position that statements "on external issues can divert the university from its mission by compromising academic freedom and damaging the university's public legitimacy. *For these reasons, the University of Virginia should express no opinions about social and political questions except as those questions directly affect its mission or operations.*" (*On Institutional Statements*, University of Virginia, August 12, 2024)

Similarly, I think it important that the University of Mary Washington be guided by this principle. With that said, institutional neutrality does not mean the university should never speak. It is perfectly appropriate for university leaders to speak to threats and opportunities related to the core function of the university. When it comes to protecting the pursuit of truth, open inquiry, reasoned debate, divergent viewpoints, and expertise, UMW is not nor ever should be neutral.

Before discussing this further with UMW's Board of Visitors in November, I welcome input from faculty, staff, and student governance in whatever manner you deem most appropriate. Whether the principle of institutional neutrality rises to the level of policy or remains a guiding principle is an open question.

I look forward to receiving your input on this important matter.