

USC STATEMENT ON UNIVERSITY DEBATES

University Senates Conference University of Illinois

As the University Senates Conference, we share with many others concerns about the university debates over hostilities between Israel and Palestinian forces in the Middle East and their consequences for innocent lives.

We are in no way taking sides on those hostilities. We mourn the loss of lives on all sides, and we recognize that the historical background that has led to the current round of violence is complex and contested.

As the leading faculty advisory body at the U of I System level, we do feel an obligation to speak about *how* these university debates, among faculty as well as among students, are playing out at each of our universities.

In this statement we want to try to articulate a principled view about how to balance our commitments to academic freedom and free speech with our commitments to maintaining a climate on our campuses in which all members of our community can speak, be heard, and feel safe.

We share a concern that this controversy has the potential to split our campuses apart and to cause some members of our community serious psychological and emotional harm. As we have seen at other schools, real violence and vandalism are possible. Before things escalate to that point, we think it is time to reexamine our values and practices.

One way things can go awry in these kinds of political debates is that the same words and slogans are often used by different people with radically different meanings. What is said, and what is intended, may not match with what is heard and understood by others. This not only exacerbates misunderstandings but promulgates "code language" that obscures rather than clarifies meanings and has the potential to escalate the vehemence of what are already difficult disagreements.

While we are very concerned about the current university debates, our purpose here is to offer broader recommendations for how this and other controversies ought to be addressed.

Here are some principles that we believe in. We support extremely broad principles of academic freedom and free speech, but these are not without limit. Inflammatory rhetoric or calls for violence, hate speech, intentional lies and distortions are not protected.

We support principles of respect and concern for all members of our university communities. Disagreement over ideas, however intense and strongly felt, should not devolve into personal attacks that make members feel unsafe or unwelcome.

We believe that fundamental principles also grow out of the mission of our universities as institutions of higher education. As universities committed to the pursuit of teaching, learning, and knowledge-based action, we have special obligations over and above those of other public institutions. We believe that debates over this latest controversy, or other controversial social or political matters, ought to respect the values of truth and accuracy; ought to be aimed at the values of learning and gaining a deeper understanding of the issues, and not just winning the argument; and ought to be consistent with the values of dialogue and fair debate that we aspire to when we talk with one another.

Finally, and most importantly, we speak to our faculty colleagues to remind us all that whatever the issues and whatever we think or believe about them personally, we are always teachers who our students look to as examples of serious thought and responsible moral leadership. What we say and how we say it as faculty are heard by many audiences, within and outside our universities, and we need to always keep that in mind. We believe that these considerations highlight the special responsibilities of faculty to always be thoughtful, reflective, and conscientious in what we say and do.