



**Principles for Executive Use of the University Voice  
At the University of Denver  
Fall 2024**

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**Overview**

In today's highly polarized and fast-paced, digitized world, civil dialogue is challenging and must be nurtured. At the university, we hold the principle of open inquiry to be fundamental to both the educational and research mission. Without open inquiry the pursuit of facts and, ultimately, truth, are limited.

At the heart of open inquiry is the freedom to question, to debate, to challenge. This requires a commitment to freedom of expression and academic freedom, complementary but not identical concepts. This is another key principle supporting the university's mission.

Thus, decisions on when, and how to use the "university" voice, must be evaluated within this broader and fundamental context about the mission of higher education. Since the university voice carries considerable weight, it can be seen as an essential factor in either encouraging or discouraging academic freedom and free speech. It is prudent to use this voice thoughtfully, intentionally, and sparingly so as not to undermine the principles undergirding our academic mission.

This document identifies principles that shall be used to guide the executive use of university voice at the University of Denver.

**What is the university voice?**

For the purposes of this document, the university voice is intended to describe 'official' mass messages sent on behalf of the institution by either the chancellor or members of the cabinet. The Board of Trustees also has the opportunity to speak on behalf of the institution but does so far less frequently and tends to be aligned with that of the university voice.

Expressive activity by faculty, students and staff is not considered an exercise of university voice. Similarly, expressive activity by colleges, school and other divisional unit leaders is also not considered an exercise of the university voice but leaders are advised to use discretion if sharing a message clearly distinct from the university voice.

### **A guiding approach from the University of Chicago**

In 1967, University of Chicago president George Beadle appointed a faculty committee chaired by Harry Kalven to address the issue of when to use the university voice at the University of Chicago. For over 50 years, the Kalven report has served as a guidepost for higher ed (although not the only such guidepost) on this issue. The report can be found on the University of Chicago website here: <https://provost.uchicago.edu/reports/report-universitys-role-political-and-social-action>.

Central to the report is the mission of the university and its values of free and open inquiry. The position of the Kalven Committee was that the use of the university voice should be restrained. Intellectual diversity, critical thinking, and open inquiry are at the very heart of a university and this report is an excellent reminder and source of principles to guide when the university voice of the University of Denver should be used. It is important to note, however, that there are many threats to open inquiry and so there are times when issues or events have profound impact on our ability to conduct open inquiry. In those cases, it may be the obligation of the university to respond and defend the principle of open inquiry and the discovery of truth.

### **Considerations**

There are a multitude of situations to consider that might determine when to use the institution's voice, whose signature appears on the message, and what to say in the message. Broadly speaking, here are some of the types of circumstances that might prompt the question of whether or not to send an institutional message:

- Social and political issues or events: These events or issues are complex and generally bring strong and varied opinions and positions. In these cases, the use of the university voice should be restrained in order for rigorous debate to occur. In addition, this category can include campus events or controversies that elicit strong and persistent reactions or any form of protracted, visible protest or civil disobedience.
- Traumatic events: These are events that result in the loss of life such as shootings, natural disasters, or other catastrophic occurrences. Of course, there may be political or social overtones to them and that would complicate the decision on whether or how best to respond. These events can be near or far--international, national, state, regional or even on campus. It is important to note that the closer they are to "home" the more likely an institutional message will be appropriate.
- Historical events: These include Veterans Day, the Sand Creek Massacre anniversary, and 9-11, among others.

When considering whether to use institutional voice, some questions naturally arise:

- Is it important under the circumstances to provide reassurance, comfort and offer resources? If so, to the full community? Or, to a specific portion of the community?

- Is it important to offer spaces and/or moments to reflect, feel, heal, and connect?
- Is it important to offer programming, courses, or lectures that enable open inquiry and understanding of the issues?
- Is it important to take a substantive position and if so why?
- When is the Chancellor's voice to be used versus that of a cabinet member?

### **Guiding principles for executive use of the university voice at the University of Denver**

- Social and political issues: The university voice in general must avoid taking a stand on political and social issues in order to reinforce the freedom to pursue inquiry and truth and prevent the silencing of ideas not shared with those of the majority or those whose voice is often not heard. In social or political issues or events, the university voice shall be avoided in nearly all cases. There may be exceptions such as those that have profound impact on the University (see below), but these should be extremely rare.
- Issues that have direct and profound impact on the University: There may be instances and issues that arise that have a profound and direct impact on the University and in these circumstances, the University may message its position.

As an example, when open inquiry at the University is at risk, the University may come forward in defense of this fundamental principle. Open, unfettered, evidence-based intellectual inquiry is at the heart of DU's mission and is an over-arching value that must be protected, and academic freedom is the mechanism for that protection. Therefore, there are circumstances when the university voice must be used to protect its core values of intellectual inquiry and academic freedom when these values are threatened.

As another example, the university voice may be used to denounce actions directed at a specific, particular group in the DU community because of certain characteristics such as race, sexual orientation, gender, religious identity or beliefs in general.

- Traumatic events: When traumatic events (such as a shooting or a natural disaster) occur that deeply impact a segment of the DU community, the appropriate office of a cabinet member shall appropriately communicate reassurance, comfort and resources that may provide aid to the community. Of course, the message will be with the support of the chancellor and the rest of the cabinet. When a traumatic event is likely to impact the vast majority of our community, the Chancellor may wish to sign the message, either with or without other cabinet members, depending upon the circumstances.
- Historical events: A list of historical events to which the university voice is used shall be kept current by the Chancellor's office. Typically, the university message is sent by the

chancellor. However, in certain cases, a cabinet member may issue a statement. The current historical events that the university shares messages for are:

- 9-11: September 11th
  - Veterans Day: November 11th
  - The Sand Creek Massacre anniversary: November 29<sup>th</sup>
- Action-oriented: Finally, while these principles are meant to guide decisions about the use of university voice, and words, at the end of the day, words will never be enough when a mass message is sent. Often, university messages alone have little effect. They can create a ‘numbing’ sensation due to the many traumatic events and issues of our time. They can also be cast as an example of ‘virtue signaling’ – an act to demonstrate the moral correctness of the university which rings hollow to those most deeply affected by what has occurred. It is important to lean into action as much as possible – for example, the university message should include, where possible, resources for community members and/or dialogues, panel discussions, and lectures to dive deeper into the issue at hand. There are also times when moments of silence, or vigils, will feel most appropriate. All action plans should consider carefully what is most needed by those most in need.