



Academic Senate

COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

February 20, 2024

To: Sang-Hee Lee, Chair
Riverside Division Academic Senate

From: Matt King, Chair
Committee on Academic Freedom

Re: Proposed UC Regents Policy on Use of University Administrative Websites

In reference to the proposed Regent's Policy for Administrative Websites, it is the position of the UCR Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) that this policy could infringe on academic freedom. At issue is the definition of "opinion." Who, our committee asks, would have the authority to define some content on an administrative website as "opinion"? Would it be a regent? A politician? Some other administrator? We find no answers in this proposed policy.

The lack of clarity around definition and authority places academic freedom in jeopardy in abundant ways. According to many members of the public and a significant percentage of elected officials today, the established facts in fields like evolutionary biology are constantly attacked as "opinion." Climate science is another example. So, too, the historiography of slavery in the United States, the text-critical scholarship of early Christianity, the modeling of labor economics, and so on and so forth.

We do not see in this proposed policy any clear safeguards against the potential censure of established, field-based facts by a public or university official who considers them inconvenient because of whatever social, political, religious, economic, or other commitment. In practice, this policy has significant potential to be selectively applied and thus to limit the speech of certain groups by barring or otherwise curtailing them from public engagement via official university websites. This is clearly a violation of the university's core commitment to academic freedom.

A policy in which regents, politicians, administrators, or any other authority lacking in the qualifications of an academic unit or specialized fields of study are handed unchecked power to potentially banalize and censure field-based facts or interpretation as "opinion," and to strike them from official UC websites must be avoided at all costs.

Curiously, the proposed policy appears to the UCR CAF as simply restaging a previously failed policy which proposed to ban "political statements" of solidarity or condemnation from university websites. That proposed policy, in our understanding, was struck down in June of 2022. What is different in the current proposal, other than a dangerous widening of potentially censored speech from "political statements" to "opinions" writ large?

The proposed Regent's Policy for Administrative Websites is a significant threat to academic freedom. It should not be adopted as framed in this proposal.