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14 October 2025

Presidential Task Force on Institutional Voice
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York 14853

Dear Members of the Presidential Task Force on Institutional Voice,

As Cornell University’s Presidential Task Force on Institutional Voice commenced its important work in the spring, I corresponded with President Michael Kotlikoff, Provost Kavita Bala, Deputy Provost Avery August, and Dean Jens Ohlin about the importance of adopting institutional neutrality. Today I am writing in support of the task force’s recent report on institutional voice. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), of which I am president, believes the recommendations in this report provide critical support for free expression and diversity of thought at Cornell, and it is my hope that President Kotlikoff and the Cornell Board of Trustees will accept them.

Refraining from institutional speech on issues unrelated to the university’s mission protects academic freedom and allows a diversity of views to be expressed. I am impressed that the task force’s report clearly and repeatedly explains how its recommendations for the appropriate use of Cornell’s institutional voice will strengthen freedom of expression and viewpoint diversity for students, faculty, and staff on campus.

The report does an excellent job of describing how its recommendations apply not only to the president and provost, but also to college leadership, academic departments, and other units. It identifies distinct issues each of these units must consider when deciding whether to use the institutional voice. Particularly at the departmental level, the interest expressed in protecting untenured faculty and in avoiding “imposing a majoritarian perspective that may inadvertently suppress dissenting views” is really exemplary.

One area of the report that would benefit from further consideration is on page four. The relevant part states:

In determining the use of its institutional voice, the university’s decision should satisfy one or more of the following criteria:

a) The issue directly affects the university’s core mission, values, or functions in ways that are easily communicated to the university community;

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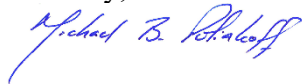
b) The issue directly affects the background conditions that make possible the academic enterprise at Cornell or in higher education generally, for example, our nation's democratic system, the rule of law, freedom of speech, or freedom of thought, and thereby impacts the university's ability to make its contributions to the common good through its research, teaching, clinical care, or engagement.

The report would be strengthened by making criterion a) a requirement for *all* cases where the institutional voice might be used. The rest of the report seems to indicate such considerations must be present in a decision to use the institutional voice, but this section's claim that decisions "should satisfy one or more of the following criteria" suggests the institutional voice could still be used even if the conditions in criterion a) are not met.

We believe the report would be stronger if criterion b) were excised completely. As written, this criterion might invite the kind of politicized institutional speech the broader report categorically rejects. If criterion b) ends up informing future policy on institutional voice, then it is ACTA's recommendation that Cornell makes clear it is for individuals not institutions to offer opinions on matters such as the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision, the Second Amendment, the electoral college, and the like. Faculty experts more properly should speak on these issues, not academic administrators.

These concerns notwithstanding, I commend the task force for generating a thoughtful and comprehensive report. Adopting a policy consistent with it will serve Cornell well.

Sincerely,



Michael B. Poliakoff, Ph.D.
President & CEO
American Council of Trustees and Alumni