

What Can Governing Boards Do?

As fiduciaries responsible for the mission and values of the institution, it is appropriate for governing boards to adopt a policy of institutional neutrality on behalf of their school and ensure that university representatives adhere to it over time.

Further Resources

Visit our webpage on institutional neutrality (GoACTA.org/institutional-neutrality) for more resources, including:

- A list of schools that have adopted the policy
- A conversation on institutional neutrality between Vanderbilt University Chancellor Daniel Diermeier and George Washington University President Emeritus Stephen Joel Trachtenberg
- Sample resolutions and policies
- Key arguments for institutional neutrality and responses to common misconceptions

ACTA's Gold Standard for Freedom of Expression™

Adopting institutional neutrality is one of 20 actions ACTA recommends colleges and universities take to promote free expression and intellectual diversity on campus.

Scan the QR code
to learn more.



ABOUT US



The **American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA)** is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to academic freedom, academic excellence, and accountability at America's colleges and universities. Founded in 1995, ACTA works with alumni, donors, trustees, and education leaders across the country to support the study of the liberal arts, uphold high academic standards, safeguard the free exchange of ideas on campus, and ensure that the next generation receives an intellectually rich, high-quality education at an affordable price. Our network consists of alumni and trustees from over **1,300** colleges and universities, including over **23,000** current board members. Our quarterly newsletter, *Inside Academe*, reaches over **15,000** readers.

ACTA's **Campus Freedom Initiative™ (CFI)** encourages colleges and universities to build cultures of free expression and intellectual diversity on their campuses by adopting the policies and practices in our 20-point action plan, the **ACTA Gold Standard for Freedom of Expression™**. CFI provides a range of resources and services, including individualized policy analysis and guidance, to help trustees and other stakeholders ensure their institutions are protecting and promoting free inquiry and the free exchange of ideas.

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Adopting a Policy of Institutional Neutrality

A Guide for College and University Governing Boards

Campus Freedom Initiative™

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“The university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic.”

—Kalven Report

What Is Institutional Neutrality?

Institutional neutrality means that a college or university refrains from taking official positions on matters of social or political controversy unless and insofar as they directly impact its mission or operations.

As stated in the University of Chicago’s 1967 Kalven Committee Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action, such a policy establishes “a heavy presumption against the university taking collective action or expressing opinions on the political and social issues of the day, or modifying its corporate activities to foster social or political values, however compelling and appealing they may be.”

In practice, it means that institutional leaders will not issue statements or use the activities and resources of the university to take sides on social and political issues unless they are compelled to do so by their responsibility to defend the mission of the institution.

Why Is Institutional Neutrality Important?

Adopting a policy of institutional neutrality protects the intellectual and nonpartisan purpose of an institution of higher education, supports academic freedom, and provides a consistent basis for navigating social and political controversies.

A powerful complement to any free expression policy consistent with the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression, institutional neutrality supports the mission of a university to be a forum for open inquiry and the free exchange of ideas. As the authors of the Kalven Report observed, “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 own community.” Taking institutional positions on matters of controversy forecloses inquiry and debate rather than encouraging them.

Institutional neutrality also supports academic freedom by helping to ensure that faculty and students are free to participate in the mission of the institution without fear that they will violate institutional orthodoxies on contentious issues. To once again quote the Kalven Report, a place of higher learning “cannot insist that all of its members favor a given view of social policy; if it takes collective action, therefore, it does so at the price of censoring any minority who do not agree with the view adopted.”

Committing to institutional neutrality communicates to the public that the university understands its role as an institution devoted to teaching and research. Colleges and universities serve the public by providing new knowledge, reliable expertise, and education. Politicization undermines these functions and, as we have seen in recent years, undermines public trust.

Finally, establishing—and following—a stated policy of institutional neutrality brings consistency to institutional governance and keeps trustees and administrators clear of political pressure. University leaders can point to the policy and their history of following it when controversies arise.

What Are the Elements of a Strong Institutional Neutrality Policy?

An institutional neutrality policy should:

- State that institutional leaders, including trustees, the president, provost, deans, and department chairs, will not take official political positions on behalf of the institution or their units within it.
- Make clear that the policy also protects university investments from undue politicization.
- Allow exceptions for matters that directly and significantly impact or threaten the mission or operations of the institution.
- Accommodate leadership’s duty to express empathy and consolation when tragedy occurs.
- Explain how and why it supports academic freedom and the mission of the institution.
- Outline a process for determining when an institution will or will not make a statement.