

Illinois College Freedom of Expression Resolution

The first president of Illinois College, Edward Beecher, spoke forcefully of America as “the land of free discussion and equal rights.” In response to the murder of the abolitionist and newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy, Beecher championed the great virtue of being “known as the decided friend of free inquiry and the fearless protector of the rights of speech.” Illinois College remains resolutely committed to this universal freedom of thought and expression as well as to the equal rights of all.

Because Illinois College is committed to free and open inquiry in all matters, it guarantees all members of the Illinois College community the broadest possible latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge, and learn. It is not proper—and is in fact contrary to its foundational mission—for Illinois College to suppress inquiry and expression even in cases where the majority of its community members find the ideas offensively wrong.

The freedom to debate and discuss the merits of competing ideas does not, of course, mean that individuals may say whatever they wish, wherever they wish. Illinois College may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of Illinois College. In addition, Illinois College may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of Illinois College. But these are narrow exceptions to the general principle of freedom of expression, which will be made with neutrality to content and never in a manner inconsistent with Illinois College’s commitment to “be the decided friend of free inquiry and the fearless protector of the rights of speech.”

True to President Beecher’s sentiments, Illinois College remains a staunch advocate for justice and equality. As a primarily residential community, Illinois College understands that the burden of free speech sometimes weighs more heavily on historically underrepresented and/or marginalized community members. The disruption in the community caused by disagreeable or offensive speech can have unequal impact, which Illinois College is committed to addressing and engaging without wavering in its defense of free inquiry and expression.

In a word, Illinois College remains fundamentally committed to the belief that the great democratic ideals of freedom, justice, and equality are not opposed to but rather require a vigorous defense of free inquiry and free expression.

Accordingly, members of the Illinois College community are free to criticize and contest the views expressed on campus, and to criticize and contest speakers who are invited to express their views on campus. However, Illinois College community members may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express beliefs, even when they deem such beliefs deeply problematic or offensive. To this end, Illinois College has a solemn responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless freedom of debate and deliberation, but also to act as “the fearless protector of the rights of speech” when others attempt to restrict it.