

Civil Discourse

Meyer Lab, 2025

Currently, there is a “perceived tension that pits academic freedom and freedom of expression against diversity, equity, and inclusion in creating a respectful learning environment for all...Formal protections for free expression are necessary but insufficient to create a culture of free expression, open inquiry, and respectful, productive debate on campus and in our country.” (**Campus Free Expression: A New Roadmap**)

How do we navigate this tension?

We start with the premise that core values in academia and society are that free speech is important, that all ideas should be entertained and treated with respect—i.e., people and their ideas should not be excluded from our discussions based on what “category” they fall into.

In a University setting, our goal is to advance understanding of fundamental knowledge, and to facilitate learning and generation of new ideas. This occurs in many ways in different fields, from using the scientific method to consider a wide range of information and ideas/hypotheses, to discussions on broad societal issues that take advantage of our collective diversity of lived experience, knowledge, and perspectives. In environmental health, examples across this spectrum include genuinely considering a wide range of hypotheses about mechanisms under study (and not simply adopting the “party line”) to values-based judgments about how to apply toxicity knowledge to improve environmental health (eg, how do we balance the benefits and harms of fossil fuels vs mining for renewable energy minerals). There is enormous value in being able to wrestle with ideas real-time, with each other. This may sometimes be uncomfortable. Disagreement about these important matters, some of which may have personal resonance, will elicit emotions. This is especially true in fields such as ours (Environmental Health) in which there are many historic and current examples of injustice. In other cases, we simply succumb to the human tendency to want to defend and become emotionally invested in our own point of view, even if it is about something that doesn't really matter (the Blue Devils are the best men's college basketball team in history! I hypothesize that Chemical X causes toxicity by Mechanism Y, not Z! etc.).

Space for open, thoughtful, civil discussions requires a certain amount of trust, respect and inclusion, and sometimes charity and grace. This is more likely if we are as curious and open-minded as possible, and give each other the benefit of the doubt. People typically express themselves less than perfectly—I often do. In a classroom setting, to encourage giving each other grace and considering ideas as ideas, I suggest explicitly assuming that others may not even be voicing their own opinion—they may be simply trying an idea out (“It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”- Aristotle).

In some ways, the apparent tension between free speech and inclusion is a false tension. “A commitment to free expression must be built on a foundation of inclusion and equity. Diversity is a necessary condition for the coexistence of different ideas and perspectives, and inclusion is a necessary condition for every member of our community to feel welcomed, affirmed, and respected...In a community marked by true inclusion and equity, even fierce debates about a range of differences of opinions and perspectives are not experienced as personal attacks on one’s very humanity and sense of well-being and belonging.” (**Campus Free Expression: A New Roadmap**)

Nonetheless, sometimes there is a tension between absolute freedom of expression and open debate on the one hand, and absolute avoidance of making anyone uncomfortable on the other. How do we decide which ideas are simply too extreme to spend time debating? I may not make the same choice as you. I will do my best to strike a good balance and create space for civil, vigorous discourse, but welcome your feedback.

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the benefits of having a discussion about a topic that brings up difficult ideas?
2. Why do we get emotionally invested in our own hypotheses or ideas, even when they don’t have a personal emotional connection? Can I think of examples where I have “followed the herd,” rather than thinking independently?
3. Where do I draw the line for a topic that is off-limits, or not worth discussing? When does “de-platforming” make sense?
4. What are some examples of (e.g., environmental health-related) harm caused by inadequate open discussion of competing scientific ideas?
5. What are some examples of (e.g., environmental health-related) harm caused by inadequate respect for or inclusion of others?

This document emerged from discussions in the Meyer lab, with helpful input from Brian McAdoo and Martin Doyle.

Additional resources:

<https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/what-were-reading-february-2024/>

<https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/free-expression-first-orientation/>

<https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/a-new-roadmap/>