

Risk Alert

Meaningful. Actionable. Timely.

November 27, 2023

Free Speech

Ninety percent (90%) of respondents, from a [recent survey](#) revealed said they see campuses as places where disparate ideas and values can and should be discussed. The escalating risk of free speech issues among students and employees in institutions of higher education is exacerbated by the volatile landscape of politics, evolving legislative changes, and global events such as wars. The potential infringement on the fundamental right to free expression poses a threat to the academic environment, potentially stifling diverse perspectives, academic discourse, and the free exchange of ideas. Failure to navigate and address these challenges proactively may lead to a climate of self-censorship, eroding the foundational principles of intellectual freedom and open dialogue within the academic community.

Insights into the Impact Free Speech has on FAMU’s Strategic Plan: Boldly Striking

Strategic Priority One - Student Success: The risk of free speech issues directly threatens the academic environment and the quality of the student experience. If not managed effectively, it can lead to a stifling of diverse perspectives and academic discourse, hindering the institution's ability to position itself as an institution of choice for talented students. Potential self-censorship resulting from this risk may create an environment that is less attractive to students, impacting retention rates and compromising the goal of optimizing academic programs.

Strategic Priority Two - Academic Excellence: The risk poses a threat to the cultivation of a culture of sustained excellence through professional development. In an atmosphere where free expression is compromised, academic freedom may be curtailed, impeding innovative research and scholarship. The potential for self-censorship may deter faculty and researchers from engaging in robust intellectual discourse, hindering the pursuit of Research 1 status and affecting measures of success related to degree production and research achievements.

Strategic Priority Three - Leverage the Brand: The risk also has implications for Strategic Priority Three. Free speech issues can impact the brand perception of the institution. A failure to proactively address challenges related to free expression may lead to negative peer perception ratings and decreased customer service satisfaction. The institution's brand may suffer if it is perceived as not upholding principles of intellectual freedom and open dialogue, affecting advocacy and support for academic outcomes. To leverage the brand effectively, it is essential to address and manage the risks associated with free speech issues, ensuring that the institution is viewed as a champion of diverse perspectives and open discourse within a supportive academic environment.



Alert Type

Awareness

Watch

Warning



"In light of the escalating risk of potential free speech issues within our institution, exacerbated by political volatility, legislative changes, and global events, it is imperative that we proactively navigate and address these challenges to safeguard the fundamental right to free expression, preserve academic discourse, and prevent the potential erosion of intellectual freedom and open dialogue within our academic community."

– FAMU Chief Risk Officer Deidre Melton

Free Speech Risk Mitigation Strategies for Management Consideration:

1. **Crisis Management Plan:** Develop a comprehensive crisis management plan that includes protocols for addressing free speech controversies promptly and transparently. Establish communication channels to keep all stakeholders informed during such crises.
2. **Clear Code of Conduct:** Clearly define and communicate a code of conduct that respects and upholds the principles of free speech while maintaining a respectful and inclusive environment. Provide training to students, faculty, and staff on the institution's expectations regarding free expression.
3. **Bridge Staff-Faculty Divide:** Implement initiatives to bridge the divide between staff and faculty, fostering open dialogue and understanding to prevent polarization within the academic community.
4. **Alumni and Donor Engagement:** Develop strategies to engage alumni and donors in constructive conversations about free speech issues, emphasizing the institution's commitment to diverse perspectives and academic freedom.
5. **Robust Free Speech Policy:** Establish a robust and clear free speech policy that outlines the institution's commitment to academic freedom and the protection of free expression rights for all members of the community.
6. **Mitigate External Party Risks:** Evaluate and manage risks associated with external parties invited onto campus, ensuring that their presence aligns with the institution's values and policies regarding free speech.
7. **Recruitment Strategies:** Develop recruitment strategies that emphasize the institution's commitment to free speech, attracting faculty and students who value an environment that encourages diverse perspectives.
8. **Student and Faculty Training:** Provide ongoing training for both students and faculty on navigating and engaging in constructive dialogue around differing viewpoints, promoting a culture of intellectual diversity.
9. **Job Placement Support:** Offer support services for graduating students to navigate potential challenges related to free speech issues in the job market, preparing them to handle diverse workplace environments.
10. **Community Engagement:** Foster community engagement initiatives that involve open forums, town hall meetings, and other platforms for discussing and addressing free speech concerns.
11. **Civil Discourse:** Implement the FAMU Civil Discourse plan which ensures demonstrative compliance with the Campus Free Express Act (1004.097, Florida Statutes); abide by the spirit of the Board of Governors, *Statement of Free Expression*; and actively participate in the Civil Discourse Initiatives of the State University System of Florida.



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