

By: Michael Poliakoff | August 18, 2022

## University Of North Carolina Strikes A Blow For Freedom Of Speech

On July 27, the University of North Carolina (UNC)–Chapel Hill’s Board of Trustees made a strong, new commitment to safeguard the free exchange of ideas on campus. Colleges and universities face immense pressure to comport with majority beliefs, but UNC’s trustees proactively resolved to maintain institutional neutrality on controversial political and social issues.

The trustees’ unanimous resolution built on the previous work of the faculty. To the credit of the UNC Faculty Assembly, it adopted in 2018 the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression, an action affirmed by the trustees in March 2021. The faculty resolution read, in part, “By reaffirming a commitment to full and open inquiry, robust debate, and civil discourse we also affirm the intellectual rigor and open-mindedness that our community may bring to any forum where difficult, challenging, and even disturbing ideas are presented.”

The trustees took a remarkable further step. In addition to confirming once more the decision of the Faculty Assembly, they put

the university in the vanguard of institutions committed to a robust heterodoxy of views and opinions by also adopting what is known as the Kalven Committee Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action. The UNC [resolution](#) notes that the Kalven Report “recognizes that the neutrality of the University on social and political issues ‘arises out of respect for free inquiry and the obligation to cherish a diversity of viewpoints’ and further acknowledges ‘a heavy presumption against the university taking collective action or expressing opinions on the political and social issues of the day.’”

In an interview with me, UNC Trustee Dr. Perrin Jones, who introduced the resolution, observed that the unanimity of the board reflected its desire for public affirmation of the university’s commitment to be a forum for open and vigorous debate, which cannot happen without institutional neutrality. Board members embrace, in Dr. Jones’s words, the “high bar” of living up to these “timeless principles.”

Predating the Chicago Principles (2014) by nearly 50 years, the Kalven Report is a highly consequential policy document in the history of higher education. It came at a time when protests against the Vietnam War raged on and off university campuses. In this contentious climate, University of Chicago President George W. Beadle [appointed](#) a special faculty committee chaired by law professor Harry Kalven, Jr., to prepare “a statement on the University’s role in political and social action.” The resulting document established the university’s official position of institutional neutrality and has guided its leaders ever since. While [almost 90](#) institutions of higher learning have adopted or affirmed the Chicago Principles as of June 2022, UNC is unique in also adopting the Kalven Report. When formally adopted, the Kalven Report can serve as an anchor for higher education leaders amid society’s unforgiving, demanding, capricious sea changes. Institutional neutrality, as articulated in the Kalven Report, allows universities to foster the

search for truth without reservation or partisan prerequisites.

As the Kalven Report states, “The university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic.” It further states: “To perform its mission in the society, a university must sustain an extraordinary environment of freedom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures. 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.” A university cannot do this, the report continues, if administrative leaders commit the institution to specific political or policy positions: “It 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 censuring any minority who do not agree with the view adopted.”

Furthermore, by remaining neutral as an institution, the university can avoid partisan labeling and maintain its credibility with the communities it serves. A 2022 [survey](#) revealed that, when asked about the economic value of a degree over the last 20 years, 45% of Democrats said it has increased, and 25% said it has decreased, whereas only 34% of Republicans said it

has increased, and 40% said it has decreased. (Among Independents, only 25% said it has increased, whereas 50% said it has decreased.) Moreover, 57% of Democrats agreed that “liberal and conservative views are equally respected on campus,” whereas only 31% of Republicans and 32% of Independents agreed. Universities’ roles include providing expert knowledge to society and preparing students for citizenship and civic leadership. Their ability to do so is diminished if universities lose their reputation for objectivity and unprejudiced judgment.

Colleges and universities will increasingly be put to the test, and at a time of deepening distrust of elite institutions, they must strive to pass the test of intellectual integrity. In a situation as contentious as the decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, the voice of institutional neutrality is likely to be determinative for civility and intellectual progress. University of Iowa President Barbara Wilson’s [statement](#) captures that ethic: “As a leader of a public university, my personal reactions will remain private because ultimately my responsibility is to ensure that our institution is a place that encourages rigorous debate, dialogue, and engagement. . . . No matter where you stand

on the issue of abortion, I ask that you help ensure that the University of Iowa is a place for open and respectful discussion of differences.”

The UNC trustees also voted unanimously that funds from mandatory student fees must be distributed to student groups and programs with viewpoint neutrality. It has been all too easy for student government or student services officials to [cut off or withhold funding](#) from student groups, whether [pro-Israel](#) or [pro-life](#), with whom they happen to disagree. Shortly after the UNC Board resolution was announced, UNC Student Body President Taliajah Vann clarified that her July 6, 2022, [executive order](#) barring funding to entities that limit reproductive rights did not apply to student groups.

UNC’s record of fairness has been strong, and with the resolutions of July 27 the trustees clearly intend to keep it that way.