

# Navigating the Boundaries of Free Speech and Hate Speech at McMaster University

Research Brief Summary



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**Abstract:**

The research conducted by the team at McMaster University aims to explore how students perceive and navigate the boundaries between hate speech and free speech on campus. The study focuses on the implications of these perceptions for the campus' democratic environment. Employing the Q-Sort method, the research delves into students' attitudes, behaviours, and experiences concerning speech freedoms and restrictions to foster a more inclusive and democratic campus community.

**Introduction:**

Free speech is fundamental to democracy in Canada, especially within university campuses like McMaster. Given the importance of free speech in a democratic society and its intersection of potential hate speech, this paper explores how Mac's students navigate and understand the ambiguous boundaries of hate and free speech. The intersection between free speech and hate speech and how it manifested among students initially prompted our investigation. Some key questions our group focused on are: How do university students perceive and navigate these boundaries? How does that affect their understanding of democracy on campus?

While McMaster made various statements on academic freedom and freedom of expression in 2011 and 2018, they may not fully address the constantly evolving landscape of academic discourse and expression. For example, the current advancements in technology and communication platforms have widely expanded students' scholarly inquiry and expression methods around the campus. McMaster's delineation of unacceptable behaviour like harassment, discrimination, and hate speech, while necessary looking at the bigger picture, also suggests subjective interpretation and potentially stifling legitimate academic discourse. Current McMaster policies foster an environment conducive to learning and expression, but they fail to address the complexities and challenges of contemporary academic discourse.

**Previous Research:**

Previous studies have indicated that contemporary university students prioritize protection against intolerant speech influenced by upbringing and social trends. Secondary factors such as political alignment and personal experiences also shape opinions on free speech. The literature suggests that classroom climate, empathy, and self-efficacy are crucial in addressing hate speech, calling for institutional and individual interventions.

Overall, previous research on this topic mentions the multifaceted nature of free speech and hate speech issues on university campuses. It underscores the importance of considering a range of factors when examining students' attitudes toward speech and the need for nuanced approaches to policy-making and campus discourse.

**Methodology:**

The study utilized the Q-Sort method (please refer to Figure 1), involving 18 students from diverse backgrounds. This method allowed for a nuanced understanding of individual perspectives on free speech. Participants sorted 20 statements related to free speech on campus into categories ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The statements covered Classroom Experiences, the McMaster Community at Large, Rules and Regulations, and Personal Guidelines. Factor analysis was conducted to identify patterns in responses.

**Results:**

The study identified three distinct perspectives among students regarding free speech and hate speech. One group valued exposure to diverse beliefs (please refer to Figure 3), another supported open political debates with clear hate speech boundaries (please refer to Figure 4), and a third group had a more relaxed view on hate speech, prioritizing democratic growth (please refer to Figure 5). The results showed a general disagreement with the statements, except for two that leaned towards agreement, indicating a complex view on the subject.

The study's results also highlighted the role of other factors like personal guidelines, rules and regulations, classroom experience, and the McMaster Peer-to-Peer community in shaping students' perceptions of free speech (please refer to Figure 2). These sections revealed that students' morals and values significantly influenced their opinions on campus free speech-related behaviours and activities while also being aware of the need to consider the potential harm and consequences of certain types of speech around campus.

**Discussion and Conclusion:**

The findings reveal that students know the delicate balance between upholding free speech and protecting democracy. However, there needs to be more clarity on the roles of individuals and the university in maintaining this balance. The study highlights the need for updated policies that reflect the evolving nature of campus discourse and the importance of educational institutions in fostering environments conducive to open dialogue without enabling hate speech. Promoting a more inclusive and democratic campus environment demands a responsive and proactive approach to education and policy-making. Therefore, McMaster's administrators must work together with the help of the MSU to develop explicit, comprehensive rules for future students engaging in any sort of discourse around campus.

**Appendix**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Figure 1.

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Statement Number</b>	<b>Statements</b>
Classroom Experience	1	Professors should support the communication of all opinions and suggestions given in class.
	2	Trigger warnings should be used for course materials that may be controversial.
	3	Classrooms should be a safe space to share opinions and differing political views.
	4	Each class discussion should have a “devil’s advocate” for the benefit of the learning process.
	5	No one should ever feel uncomfortable about speaking openly in opinion-based class discussion.
McMaster Community at Broad	6	Protests should be allowed on campus.
	7	Students should have a say in what constitutes hate speech.
	8	Open dialogue, including what some may find hate speech, is necessary for democracy to thrive on campus.
	9	Individuals should be held accountable for the impact of their speech even if unintentional.
	10	It is healthy to have regular political or social debates with your peers.
Rules and Regulations	11	Expulsion for speech that offends me is an adequate penalty.
	12	Expressing diverse opinions contributes to a greater quality of education.
	13	As a place for political conversations, universities have an obligation to create clear guidelines of speech.
	14	Student Unions should monitor and access free speech violations.
	15	Universities should focus on educating students about the consequences of hate speech rather than giving out broad restrictions.
Personal Guidelines	16	There are very clear definitions and boundaries between hate speech and free speech.
	17	Political discourse on campus should not be taken personally.
	18	People that you surround yourself with should have similar political beliefs as you.
	19	The courses you enroll in should align with your current beliefs and opinions.
	20	Individuals should limit the communication of beliefs and opinions that they know may offend someone.

Figure 2.

# Composite Q Sort for Factor 1

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
** ◀ 18. People that you surround yourself with should have similar	* 19. The courses you enroll in should all align with your current beliefs	13. As a place for political conversations, Universities have an	15. Universities should focus on educating students about	12. Expressing diverse opinions contributes to a greater	3. Classrooms should be a safe space to share opinions and differing	* ▶ 5. No one should ever feel uncomfortable about speaking
	11. Expulsion for speech that offends me is an adequate penalty	** ◀ 6. Protests should be allowed on campus.	** 8. Open dialogue, including what some may consider hate	17. Political discourse on campus should not be taken personally	* ▶ 1. Professors should support the communication of all opinions	
		16. There are very clear definitions and boundaries between hate	** 9. Individuals should be held accountable for the impact of their speech	2. Trigger warnings should be used for course materials that		
		20. Individuals should limit the communication of beliefs and	4. Each class discussion should have a "devil's advocate" for	7. Students should have a say in what constitutes harmful speech		
			** ◀ 10. It is healthy to have regular political or social debates			
			14. Student Unions should monitor and assess free speech			

Figure 3.

## Composite Q Sort for Factor 2

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
* ◀ 19. The courses you enroll in should all align with your current beliefs	11. Expulsion for speech that offends me is an adequate penalty	* ◀ 1. Professors should support the communication of all opinions	15. Universities should focus on educating students about	** ▶ 9. Individuals should be held accountable for the impact of their speech	** ▶ 16. There are very clear definitions and boundaries between hate	** ▶ 6. Protests should be allowed on campus.
	** ◀ 17. Political discourse on campus should not be taken personally	20. Individuals should limit the communication of beliefs and	18. People that you surround yourself with should have similar	7. Students should have a say in what constitutes harmful speech	10. It is healthy to have regular political or social debates	
		* ◀ 4. Each class discussion should have a "devil's advocate" for	** ◀ 3. Classrooms should be a safe space to share opinions and differing	12. Expressing diverse opinions contributes to a greater		
		** ◀ 8. Open dialogue, including what some may consider hate	14. Student Unions should monitor and assess free speech	13. As a place for political conversations, Universities have an		
			2. Trigger warnings should be used for course materials that			
			** ◀ 5. No one should ever feel uncomfortable about speaking			

Figure 4.

# Composite Q Sort for Factor 3

-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
11. Expulsion for speech that offends me is an adequate penalty	** ◀ 9. Individuals should be held accountable for the impact of their speech	4. Each class discussion should have a "devil's advocate" for	17. Political discourse on campus should not be taken personally	10. It is healthy to have regular political or social debates	3. Classrooms should be a safe space to share opinions and differing	* 5. No one should ever feel uncomfortable about speaking
	** ◀ 20. Individuals should limit the communication of beliefs and	16. There are very clear definitions and boundaries between hate	* 1. Professors should support the communication of all opinions	18. People that you surround yourself with should have similar	** ▶ 8. Open dialogue, including what some may consider hate	
		** ◀ 15. Universities should focus on educating students about	7. Students should have a say in what constitutes harmful speech	12. Expressing diverse opinions contributes to a greater		
		* ◀ 14. Student Unions should monitor and assess free speech	** ▶ 19. The courses you enroll in should all align with your current beliefs	** 6. Protests should be allowed on campus.		
			13. As a place for political conversations, Universities have an			
			2. Trigger warnings should be used for course materials that			

Figure 5.