

**From: Office of Strategic Communication**

**To: Students, faculty and staff**

**Subject: UW updates policy on expressive activity, expands educational and community resources**

**Date: Aug. 28, 2024**

The University of Wisconsin–Madison has consolidated and clarified campus policy to ensure that free expression, a bedrock UW value, remains protected on campus and that safeguards are in place to maintain the university’s vital mission and operations, including the ability of students to access education without disruption.

The newly named Expressive Activity Policy and accompanying guide collect into a single set of resources information that had been dispersed across different campus policies and guidance, while also providing renewed clarity for students, employees and campus visitors. The policy and guide are designed to better help students, employees and campus visitors understand their rights and responsibilities and the resources available to them.

This work is part of a broader effort to educate the campus community on all aspects of free expression, provide transparency and expand civil discourse programming. The overall goal of this effort is to ensure that the foundational work of the university — inquiry, research discovery, scholarship, teaching and learning — continues unhindered.

“The robust exchange of ideas and viewpoints is central to a university. That is a key part of what a great university does, or should be doing, every day, and it is what we mean, here at UW–Madison, when we talk about fearless sifting and winnowing. That means that we will often engage with ideas and perspectives that may be new to us, and that might, in some cases, cause us unease or discomfort,” says Chancellor Jennifer L. Mnookin. “My hope is that, as a Badger community, we approach our differences with open minds, a willingness to listen, respect for one another, and a generosity of spirit.”

## Policies and guidelines

The university's approach to expressive activity can be found in two complementary documents. The first, the [Expressive Activity Policy](#), sets forth — in detailed legal terms — what is permitted by the First Amendment and what is restricted based on time, place and manner limits established by the university.

The second, the [Expressive Activity Guide](#), is a user-friendly companion piece that expands on topics for more specific guidance. It includes practical examples of what is allowed and what isn't, as well as information and assistance on how to organize events and protests that comply with the policy, and what people can (and cannot) do if they find an expressive activity offensive.

The policy reaffirms and makes more explicit that expressive activity is generally allowed at outdoor public university spaces, subject to reasonable time, manner and place limitations. These limitations allow for equitable access to university space by all members of the campus community and facilitate the safe and efficient operations of the university, such as the ability of students to study and instructors to teach without disruption.

Revisions to existing campus policies include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Expressive activity is prohibited within 25 feet of entrances to university-owned or university-controlled buildings and facilities. The University of Wisconsin Police Department may increase this distance when necessary to protect the safety of individuals or university property.
- Signs used in buildings cannot be larger than 3 feet by 3 feet. They must be handheld to comply with longstanding policy that prohibits the use of sticks or standards to support signs.
- Amplified sound is presumed to create a noise disturbance when it produces sounds above 85 decibels in an indoor area 50 feet or more from the source of the noise, unless authorized in advance or part of a university event.
- Handheld, battery-powered sound amplification (such as small Bluetooth speakers or bullhorns) will now be allowed without prior authorization, although not during finals period or in a manner that causes a noise disturbance. Per the

policy, all other sound amplification, whether as part of a planned event or spontaneous activity, requires permission.

- Certain iconic areas on campus now have specific policies for expressive activity. For instance, people cannot block access to the Abraham Lincoln statue at the top of Bascom Hill or prevent others from taking photos with the statue during the week before the beginning of the fall semester and the week of commencement at the end of each semester. Similar restrictions apply to the large graduation year numbers that are erected near the base of Bascom Hill in the days around commencement.

The university will be content-neutral – that is, it will not consider the substance of viewpoint of any expressive activity when applying the policy.

### **Educational opportunities**

The policy update represents one of numerous steps the university has taken to ensure that both freedom of expression and a strong sense of belonging can flourish on campus. Some of the other steps:

- The new [Free Expression at UW–Madison module](#) details concepts such as civil discourse, academic freedom, offensive speech, and protest in the context of First Amendment rights. While required for incoming freshmen and transfer students, all members of the campus community are encouraged to view the online modules on [the university's free expression site](#).
- Employees and students with questions about political campaign and public advocacy activities on campus can find answers at [Political activity and activism on campus: Guidelines for fall 2024](#).
- The university has provided additional clarity on processes and expectations for Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) by updating its [conduct process for student organizations](#). In addition, each RSO is now required to have an adviser to help them achieve the group's goals. Assistance will be provided to RSOs that need help finding an

adviser. The Center for Leadership and Involvement will be providing support for these groups by expanding the training and assistance for advisers.

- University leaders have been working with groups of students, faculty and staff to develop a clear and consistent policy describing when the university uses its institutional voice to address or take a stand on an issue. The policy is expected to be completed by early September.
- [Badger Dialogues](#), a series of informal opportunities for campus administrators and students from a variety of backgrounds to connect, will continue again this year. Scheduled events [will be posted here](#).
- Begun last year, [Deliberation Dinners](#) provide undergraduate students opportunities to deliberate about important political issues in ideologically and demographically diverse groups of peers. Through this initiative, students develop the ability to analyze challenging and authentic political issues, improve their speaking and listening skills, and come to recognize the importance of considering multiple and competing views. Learn more about [how to get involved here](#).

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