

Shaping Our Shared Commitment: A Thoughtful Revision of the Free Expression Statement

Introductory remarks by Communication Studies faculty member, Helen Acosta, March 12, 2025

I want to begin by expressing my appreciation for the intent and effort behind the original statement on free expression. Dr. Joe Saldivar, as the original author of the statement three years ago, has worked to ensure that Bakersfield College remains a place where ideas can be freely expressed and debated.

Since the pandemic, we've rebuilt connections, relearned how to engage, and reaffirmed our shared mission. Once routine conversations grew more complex, it's been hard, but we found our way back to open dialogue and mutual respect. This revision builds on that growth—preserving the foundation while affirming that free expression is both a right and a responsibility we all share.

Rather than revising the original statement line by line, I drafted a substitute document and then reviewed it with Dr. Saldivar. Together, we worked to preserve the original intent while strengthening it in three key ways:

1. Restoring Speaker Agency – Free expression is a right, but with that right comes the responsibility to engage in discourse thoughtfully and with academic integrity.
2. Balancing Rights with Responsibilities – Collegial discourse is a shared endeavor, where both speakers and listeners play a role in fostering meaningful dialogue.
3. Aligning with Educational Principles – Bakersfield College is not just a place where speech is protected but a place where ideas are exchanged in ways that support learning, respect, and scholarly engagement.

The version posted on the Senate website will reflect one small but important correction: the final section is now titled "Commitment to Academic Freedom and Collegial Discourse," and within that section, "ethical communication" has been changed to "collegial communication."

This final section is key to what makes this revision distinct. It affirms that free expression is most meaningful when it fosters an environment of mutual respect, intellectual curiosity, and productive academic exchange. By explicitly acknowledging collegial discourse as a core part of how we engage with one another, this addition reinforces our role as an institution that not only protects speech but also cultivates an academic culture where communication strengthens our community.

By adopting this revised statement, we ensure that Bakersfield College remains a space where difficult conversations can happen, where diverse perspectives can be shared, and where free expression is exercised in a way that reflects the values of scholarly engagement and collegial dialogue.

I encourage you to review the document—including the analysis, rationale, and both versions—and bring it back to your areas for robust discussion. Right now, we have the time to be deliberate; no immediate crisis demands that we rush this process. This is an opportunity to build a strong foundation of shared understanding, ensuring that the principles we adopt truly reflect our values as a learning community.