

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. Protecting free expression is a foundational principle of higher education, and I commend the work that has gone into articulating that commitment.

Over the past few years, as we emerged from the pandemic, we have relearned how to engage with one another, rebuild our connections, and reaffirm our shared educational mission. Conversations that once felt routine became more complex, deepening our commitment to open dialogue and mutual respect. This revised statement reflects that growth—preserving the foundation of the original while emphasizing that free expression is not just a right but a responsibility to engage in collegial discourse that strengthens our community.

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** – The revised statement makes it clear that 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** – It emphasizes that collegial discourse is a shared endeavor, where both speakers and listeners play a role in fostering meaningful dialogue.
3. **Aligning with Educational Principles** – The revision affirms that Bakersfield College is not just a place where speech is protected, but a place where ideas are exchanged in ways that support learning, mutual respect, and scholarly engagement.

As we review the revised statement, I want to note one small but important correction: In the final section, the heading should read "Commitment to Collegial Discourse," not "Ethical Discourse." Additionally, in the second sentence of that section, "ethical communication" should be changed to "collegial communication." Please be sure to make these corrections in your version of the document to ensure alignment with the title and purpose of the revision.

This final section is particularly significant because it highlights what makes this revision distinct from the original statement. 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 rather than dividing it.

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 take the document I provided—which includes a section-by-section analysis, the rationale for each change, and both versions of the statement—back to your areas. I hope you will engage in robust discussions. 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.