

End-of-Year Report

2024-2025

Joint Committee for Civil Discourse

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Overview

The Joint Committee on Free Speech Promotion supports the mission of the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse (UWL) by promoting awareness and understanding of free speech, freedom of expression, and academic freedom. The committee’s efforts align with UWL’s mission, vision, and values, and advance the objectives of the UW System Board of Regents’ Policy Document 4-21, Commitment to Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression, along with related UW System and UWL policies.

The committee is charged with planning and implementing educational programs and activities that support one or both of the following goals: 1) Provide students, faculty, and staff with opportunities to explore the educational, social, cultural, political, and legal dimensions of free speech, freedom of expression, academic freedom, and related topics, and/or 2) Demonstrate the importance of these freedoms by facilitating constructive engagement with controversial or challenging ideas.

To support these goals, the committee aims to organize at least one event annually in conjunction with Free Speech Week (the third week of October) and/or other relevant occasions. The committee also collaborates with campus stakeholders to support additional events throughout the academic year.

The committee does not receive complaints, handle grievances, or adjudicate disputes related to free speech, freedom of expression, academic freedom, or any other issues.

Membership

The current committee, effective January 2025 through December 2025, is comprised of the following members:

- 1) Academic Staff:
 - a) Caleb Colon-Rivera, Center for Civil Dialogue and Civic Engagement Program Manager
- 2) Faculty
 - a) Anthony Chergosky, Assistant Professor – Pol Sci and Public Administration
- 3) University Staff
 - a) Kailey Mael, University Advancement Program Associate
- 4) Student Senate
 - a) Jackson Skarp, Student
 - b) Isabel Piarulli, Student
- 5) Ad Hoc Appointed by Chancellor
 - a) Kara Ostlund, Dean of Students
 - b) Ashley Nowak, Center for Civil Dialogue and Civic Engagement Director
 - c) Jenni Brundage, Director of Residence Life

2024-2025 Initiatives

Free Speech Week

Free Speech Week 2024 at UW–La Crosse coincided with the lead-up to the U.S. presidential election, generating heightened interest and engagement around issues of free expression, civil discourse, and media literacy. The Joint Committee on Free Speech Promotion organized three signature events to foster critical thinking and constructive dialogue across campus.

The week began with a webinar for faculty and staff hosted by the Constructive Dialogue Institute and presented by Jake Fay. This session introduced an evidence-based framework for engaging in meaningful conversations across differences. Participants explored the principles of constructive dialogue such as letting go of the need to “win,” getting curious, sharing personal stories, and navigating conflict with purpose. The session emphasized the importance of preparing for dialogue, building listening skills, and asking thoughtful questions. Drawing on insights from moral psychology and communication research, the webinar encouraged attendees to seek common ground and foster a culture of respectful engagement.

Next, a student-focused lunch and learn titled “Critical Thinking Around the First Amendment” was led by UWL professors Sam Scinta and James Szymalak. This interactive session invited students to examine the scope and implications of the First Amendment, using historical and legal frameworks to explore the boundaries of protected speech. Topics included the evolution of free speech jurisprudence, the distinction between government and private regulation of speech, and the role of discomfort in academic inquiry. Students were encouraged to approach conversations with humility and to consider the responsibilities that accompany their rights as citizens and learners.

The week concluded with a keynote address on media literacy by Richard Brown of Wisconsin Watch, titled “Guardian of Truth: The Power of Media Literacy – Understanding Media’s Impact on Society and Protecting Our Future.” Aimed at students, the event began with a light

lunch and informal group interactions, followed by a welcome reception with coffee and cookies to foster community. In his keynote, Brown explored the dual nature of media as both a unifying and divisive force. He reflected on how media has historically driven social change while also cautioning against its potential to reinforce societal biases through selective framing. Emphasizing that media literacy is a civic responsibility, Brown urged students to critically assess the information they consume and to recognize their role in shaping a more informed and equitable society. The event concluded with a facilitated Q&A session hosted by Taylor, followed by a meet-and-greet that allowed students to connect more personally with the speaker and one another.

Together, these events provided the campus community with opportunities to reflect on the values of free speech, engage with challenging ideas, and develop the skills necessary for thoughtful, informed dialogue in a democratic society.



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FACULTY AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT ON DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Monday, October 21 | 12-1 p.m.
Online & Room 3120, Student Union

This webinar will address skill development for handling controversial topics while emphasizing principles of free speech. Facilitators will be The Constructive Dialogue Institute. Under the PSI framework – Prepare, Support, Intervene – participants will learn strategies to foster constructive dialogue.

FREE SPEECH IS FOR ALL



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STUDENT LUNCH & LEARN: 1ST AMENDMENT & CRITICAL THINKING

**Tuesday, October 22 | 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m.
Room 3110, Student Union**

The session will explore fundamental questions about the First Amendment's scope and its implications for free expression on campus. It will encourage students to critically engage with complex topics, emphasizing the value of diverse viewpoints.



JAMES SZYMALAK
Assistant Professor
Political Science & Public
Administration



SAMUEL SCINTA
Lecturer
Political Science & Public
Administration

FREE SPEECH IS FOR ALL



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KEYNOTE & COUCH CONVERSATION MEDIA LITERACY WITH RICHARD BROWN FROM WISCONSIN WATCH

**Wednesday, October 23 | 2 p.m.
The Bluffs, Student Union**

Participants will hear stories and think deeply about media consumption and its implications.

FREE SPEECH IS FOR ALL



#SpeechMatters

On April 10, JCCD hosted a group viewing of the University of California's #SpeechMatters webinar series, themed "Truth, Trust, and Transformation." The event took place in the student union from 10:30 AM to 2:30 PM. The webinar featured a series of thought-provoking sessions, including "(Re)Building Trust in Higher Education," "Mis/Disinformation and the Decline of Expertise," and "Taking the Temperature of Campus Speech." These sessions brought together

leading experts to explore the challenges and opportunities facing higher education and free speech today.

To foster community engagement, the committee provided tables for group viewing, along with food, snacks, and drinks. Structured discussion questions and interactive notetaking through mentimeter, an interactive presentation and engagement tool that allows users to create dynamic presentations, polls, quizzes, and other interactive elements. It's used to engage audiences in real-time, whether in-person or virtually, by facilitating participation and gathering feedback, were offered between sessions to encourage reflection and dialogue. Key themes that emerged included the role of trust as a foundational element in higher education, impacting academic integrity, faculty autonomy, and institutional credibility. Participants reflected on the inequities between institutions, particularly within the UW System, and the need for greater transparency in hiring and decision-making processes.

Concerns were also raised about the student-as-customer model versus viewing students as collaborators, and the lack of trust among campus groups, including faculty, staff, administrators, and students. Attendees noted that short leadership tenures and underfunded basic needs programs contribute to a sense of instability and mistrust. The discussion highlighted that student distrust of administration often leads them to rely more on peer networks, and that many students approach college as a checklist rather than a space for inquiry and engagement.

The event underscored that rebuilding trust in higher education requires both institutional action and systemic change, with a commitment to inclusivity, transparency, and collaboration across all levels of the academic community.



In addition to these major events, members from JCCD contributed to a variety of events hosted by other academic departments, including but not limited to the Social Justice Week documentary screening of Undivided, The Pluralist Lab @ UWL event, and an Academic Freedom and Speech Regulation student workshop.

2025-2026 Planning

Looking ahead to the next academic year, the Joint Committee on Free Speech Promotion will continue its tradition of hosting events during Free Speech Week in October. These events will be designed to engage students, faculty, staff, and the broader community in meaningful learning and dialogue. The 2025 theme, “Truth in the Noise: Navigating Facts, Media, and Ideologies,” will explore how critical thinking, clarity, and transparency are essential for student success and civic engagement. Programming will include opportunities for faculty and staff to reflect on instructional practices that promote open inquiry and critical analysis, while also addressing the false dichotomy between free expression and inclusion. Through workshops and interactive sessions, we aim to foster a campus climate that values curiosity, accountability, and respectful dialogue while promoting awareness and understanding of free speech, freedom of expression, and academic freedom.