Minority Report

By Anna Lamin, Faculty Senator from D'Amore-McKim School of Business

My opposition to adopting the Chicago Principles rests on several interrelated concerns.

- **They weaken Northeastern's existing free-expression framework by downgrading *civility*.** Northeastern's current Statement on Free Expression explicitly links free expression to civility and mutual respect. This connection is intentional and central to how expression is meant to function in an academic community.
- **They conflict with faculty values.** Faculty survey data show that a majority of Northeastern faculty rank civility as the primary institutional value, support protest only when it remains non-disruptive, and overwhelmingly reject shouting down speakers or occupying buildings.
- **They do not match faculty views about where academic freedom matters most.** Faculty locate their greatest academic freedom concerns in teaching, research, and funding, which are domains governed by professional, civil norms, not in disruptive protest surrounding speakers.
- **They risk reducing, rather than expanding, meaningful expression.** Without civility as a governing parameter, expression can devolve into harassment and intimidation, encouraging self-censorship and rewarding the loudest and most aggressive actors. Civility is therefore a precondition for robust discourse, not an obstacle to it.
- **They are unnecessary to address policy scope.** If the goal is to clarify coverage for part-time or international faculty, more direct institutional solutions exist that preserve Northeastern's current framework without importing a different model.

Taken together, these points show that adopting the Chicago Principles would move Northeastern away from a framework that reflects faculty preferences, supports learning, and protects genuine academic freedom—while offering no clear benefits that cannot be achieved through better-targeted alternatives.

1. The core issue: Chicago Principles weaken Northeastern's emphasis on civility

The key difference between Northeastern University's existing "Statement on Free Expression" and the Chicago Principles is that Northeastern's statement explicitly ties free expression to community standards of respectful engagement. Northeastern's statement includes the following:

> "where diverse views can be safely expressed and debated by community members in an atmosphere of *civility and mutual respect*" (emphasis added).

This clause is not incidental. It makes clear that civility and mutual respect are not optional ideals, but integral to how free expression is meant to operate in a university environment. In contrast, the Chicago Principles place far less emphasis on civility as a governing norm, which risks reframing campus disagreement as a domain in which disruption and intimidation are tolerated as inevitable byproducts of "free expression."

2. Faculty preferences align with Northeastern's current approach

Importantly, Northeastern faculty themselves place a clear priority on civility. The Academic Freedom Committee included several questions in the Fall 2025 faculty survey that addressed this issue directly. The results are unambiguous: as behavior becomes more disruptive and therefore less civil, faculty support drops sharply.

Four key questions illustrate this pattern:

1. Question: Assume that the values of 'civility', 'belonging', and 'free expression' are core values of Northeastern University. In your opinion, which is the primary value? In other words, when these values come into conflict, which ordering best reflects your personal priorities? (437 respondents out of 589 total respondents answered this question)

The results in Figure 1 show that faculty overwhelmingly prioritize civility by a majority. In fact, roughly one-third more respondents rank civility as the primary value compared to free expression or belonging.

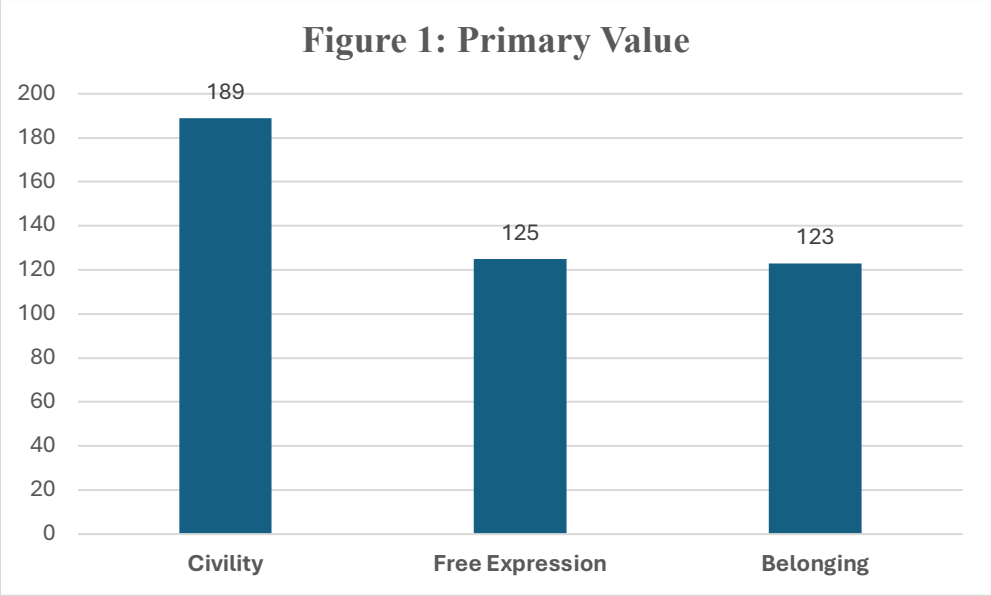


Table 1 shows the breakdown by college. What is apparent is that civility is ranked as the dominant value by faculty at the majority of colleges, including: 1) College of Science, 2) College of Engineering, 3) Bouvé College of Health Sciences, 4) College of Social Sciences and Humanities, 5) D'Amore-McKim School of Business, and 6) College of Professional Studies.

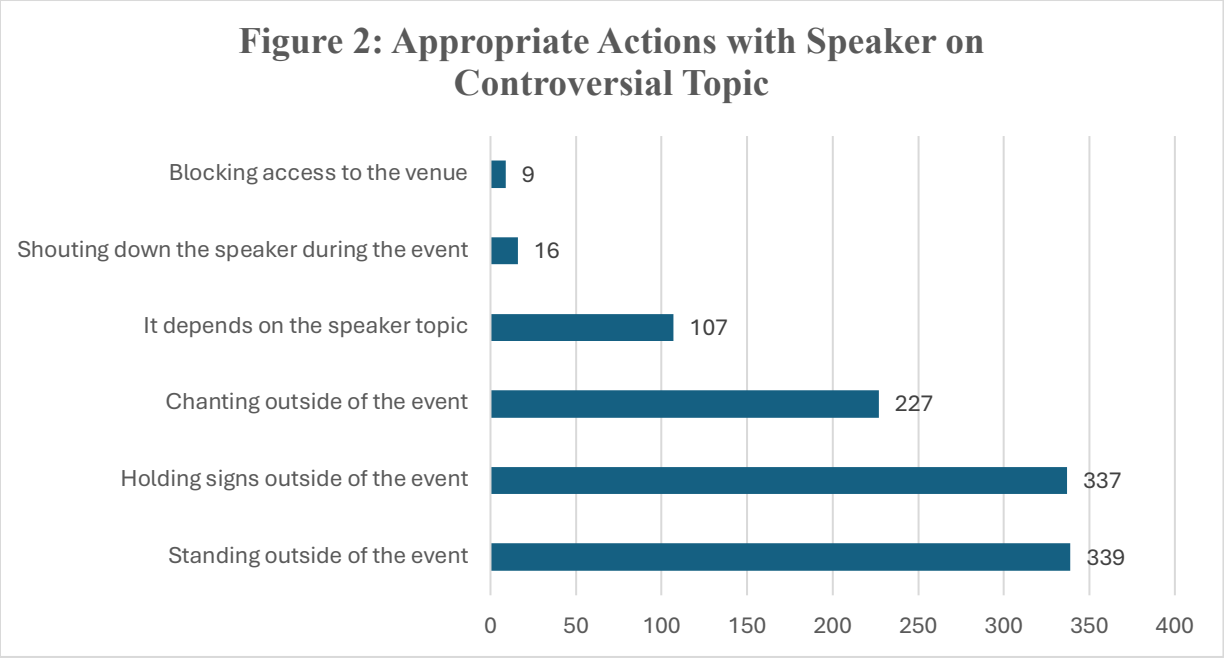
Table 1: Primary Value by College

College	Civility	Free Expression	Belonging
College of Science	37.5	29.5	21.5
College of Engineering	35	12.5	12.5
Bouvé College of Health Sciences	30.5	11.5	17
College of Social Sciences and Humanities	27	22.5	23
D'Amore-McKim School of Business	25.5	8	15.5
College of Arts, Media and Design	13.5	16	16
College of Professional Studies	9	5	5
Khoury College of Computer Sciences	6.5	8.5	8
Mills College at Northeastern	1.5	5.5	0
School of Law	1	4	3.5

Notes: *n*=432 respondents; There were 26 responses from faculty with joint appointments. Each of these was allocated a weight of 0.5 to each college to which the faculty member belongs to.

2. Question: A speaker has been invited to campus to present research on a controversial topic. Is it appropriate for university community members to do the following? Check all that apply. (383 respondents out of 589 respondents answered this question)

Figure 2 shows that very few faculty view actions such as shouting down a speaker (4%) or blocking access to an event (2%) as appropriate responses to a controversial campus speaker. By contrast, roughly 88% of respondents consider standing outside the event or holding signs to be acceptable forms of protest. These results show that as behaviors become more disruptive, faculty support drops very sharply, highlighting the importance faculty place on civility in campus discourse.

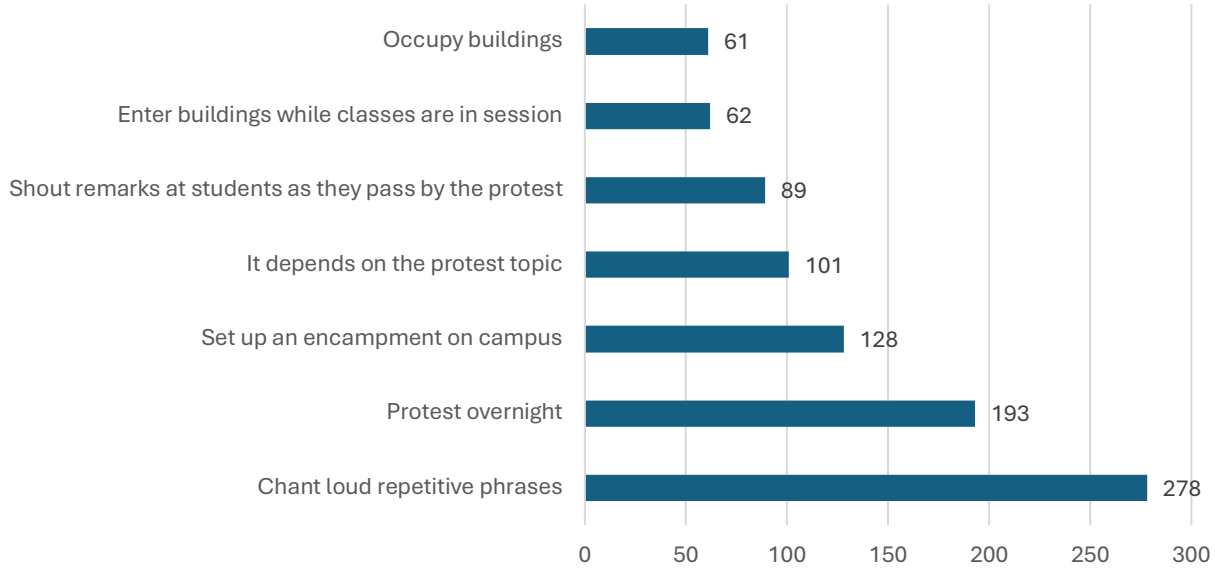


3. Question: A mix of students and faculty are participating in a demonstration on campus that has been approved by the university administration. Is it appropriate for university community members to do the following? Check all that apply. (334 respondents out of 589 respondents answered this question)

Figure 3 presents the results for this question. Once again, an activity such as chanting is widely viewed as an appropriate response, with over 83% of respondents indicating it is acceptable. In contrast, entering or occupying buildings is considered appropriate by only about 18% of faculty, a small minority.

The pattern is unmistakable. Faculty strongly support protest activity so long as it remains relatively non-disruptive, but approval collapses as actions become more intrusive and less civil. Indeed, roughly two-thirds of respondents reject these uncivil behaviors outright, underscoring that the faculty norm is not permissiveness toward disruption, but a clear preference for orderly, civil expression.

Figure 3: Appropriate Actions during Demonstration on Campus



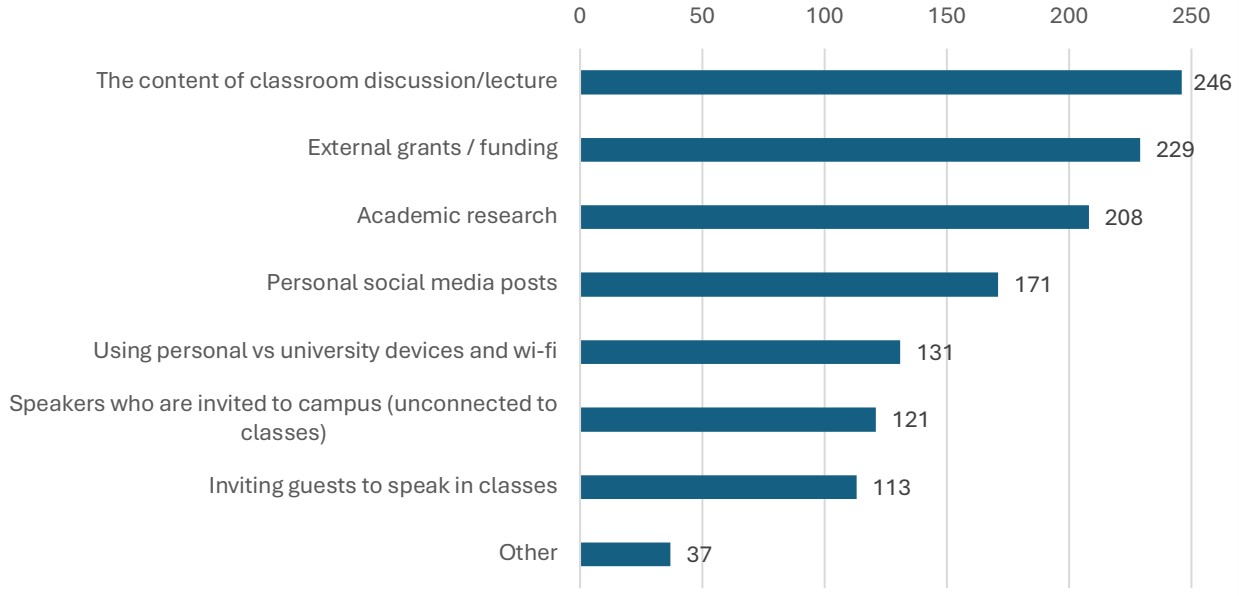
4. Question Please consider the academic freedom and free expression concerns listed below. Which of the following do you worry about personally? Select all that apply. (389 respondents out of 589 respondents answered this question)

The last question dealt with understanding the *contexts* in which faculty express concern about academic freedom and free expression Figure 4 presents the results. Faculty concern about academic freedom revolves around teaching, research, and funding, settings that are typically governed by professional norms of collegiality, peer review, and civil discourse. In other words, the contexts in which academic freedom matters most to faculty are not ones characterized by disruption or incivility.

Conversely, in contexts where civility is most likely to be contested, such as external speakers for campus events, faculty are comparatively less likely to view academic freedom as a pressing issue. This suggests that faculty do not primarily conceptualize academic freedom as a license for disruptive or uncivil conduct surrounding speakers. Rather, they understand academic freedom as protection for scholarship, pedagogical autonomy, and research independence within fundamentally civil institutional environments.

Put differently, when faculty say they are concerned about academic freedom, they are overwhelmingly referring to the freedom to teach, research, and pursue funding without interference; not to the freedom to tolerate incivility or disruption in the name of expression. This distinction is critical for interpreting faculty attitudes and for evaluating claims that elevating civility undermines academic freedom.

Figure 4: Areas where Faculty have Concerns about Academic Freedom & Free Expression



In summary, the Faculty Survey results clearly show that a majority of faculty prioritize civility over free expression, and subsequent questions reinforce this pattern: while actions such as standing outside an event or holding signs are widely viewed as appropriate, more disruptive and therefore less civil behaviors, such as shouting down a speaker or occupying buildings, are deemed appropriate by only a small fraction of faculty. Northeastern faculty thus do not understand academic freedom as a value that supersedes civility; instead, they rank civility as the primary institutional value, strongly reject disruptive and uncivil forms of protest, and express their greatest academic freedom concerns in settings such as classrooms, research, and external funding, where civil, professional norms already prevail.

In advocating for adoption of the Chicago Principles, the Academic Freedom Committee is therefore moving *against* the stated preferences and values of the faculty. Faculty have made clear that they want a campus culture grounded in civility and respectful dialogue.

3. Why civility is important: it protects discourse and promotes learning

Universities have long been centers of protest and political organizing, and they will remain so in the future. Inevitably, some protests will become less civil, meaning universities will continue to confront instances of uncivil behavior. But it is unrealistic to expect institutions to allow uncivil conduct to proceed without limitation because civility is the parameter that separates discourse from harassment and intimidation.

Without this parameter, free expression can easily devolve into harassment. In the absence of basic expectations of mutual respect and civility, the incentive structure rewards the loudest, most aggressive, and most extreme behavior, such as those willing to disrupt events, shout down opposing views, or intimidate others. The result is not an exchange of ideas, but a contest of intimidation in which power shifts to whoever can create the most fear or disruption and thus gain the most influence on campus. In that environment, what prevails is not open debate but mob rule.

Moreover, incivility acts to reduce free expression *in practice*, as those with unpopular or minority views self-censor. While in theory the lack of parameters promises more speech, in practice due to self-censorship, it produces less speech. The result is that the campus becomes less intellectually diverse, not more. Civility parameters protect the exchange of ideas on campus; they do not hinder it.

In addition, the role of a university is to promote discourse and teach the next generation how to disagree, debate and deliberate without resorting to intimidation and disruption, both of which are characteristics of incivility. Universities educate and prepare leaders for the future. Without civility, campuses do not teach students to persuade, instead they teach them to shout, disrupt, and dominate. In that sense, civility is not a constraint on the mission of higher education; it is a core part of it.

Finally, once campus behavior becomes uncivil, then harassment, intimidation or even potential violence can quickly follow. At that point, the university is exposed to significant institutional risk. Failure to respond appropriately can trigger a cascade of lawsuits, complaints and heightened scrutiny from lawmakers, alumni and funders. For this reason, it is not surprising that universities act to curb uncivil behavior regardless of their positions on the Chicago Principles.

In short, privileging civility is not a retreat from free expression, instead it is how universities ensure free expression remains educative rather than destructive.

4. Why the Chicago Principles are unnecessary for faculty coverage

It is important to clarify a recurring claim: that Northeastern's Statement on Free Expression applies only to full-time faculty because it appears in the Faculty Handbook. If the committee's concern is to ensure clearer inclusion of part-time or international faculty, adopting the Chicago Principles is neither the only, nor the most direct way to accomplish that goal.

Part-time faculty are already explicitly covered under existing institutional agreements, and at least some international campuses operate under formal policies that explicitly address academic freedom within their governing legal frameworks. The Committee did not undertake a systematic review of these existing mechanisms before asserting that adopting the Chicago Principles would newly extend academic freedom protections to faculty who supposedly lack them.

For part-time faculty, the collective bargaining agreement[1] between Northeastern University and Service Employees International Union Local 509 (entered August 17, 2023) includes Article 5, "Academic Freedom and Teaching Expectations," which states at the beginning of Section 1:

> *Faculty members shall be entitled to academic freedom on the same basis as all other faculty members involved in teaching or scholarship at the University*.

In other words, part-time faculty already have the same academic freedom protections as full-time faculty. There is no need to adopt the Chicago Principles to extend academic freedom to part-time faculty as this is already in place.

Northeastern University London has a Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech[2], as required by English law, which applies to faculty on that campus and explicitly addresses the issue of academic freedom, stating:

> 8. *Freedom of speech and academic freedom are fundamental to the University's mission of experiential education, high-impact research, and global reach. By promoting and protecting freedom of speech within the law, we empower our students, faculty, alumni, partners, visiting speakers, and wider community to*

[1] Collective bargaining agreement was accessed on February 10, 2026: https://provost.northeastern.edu/wp-content/uploads/CBA-Part-Time-Faculty-Boston-2023-20261.pdf

[2] The Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech can be found in its entirety here: https://www.nulondon.ac.uk/academic-handbook/policies-and-procedures/general/operations/code-of-practice-on-freedom-of-speech/ (accessed on February 11, 2026)

challenge conventional thinking, explore diverse viewpoints, and engage in the robust intellectual discourse necessary to solve complex global problems and pursue meaningful impact.

9. *As a diverse academic community, we embrace the expression of conflicting opinions and ideas. Engaging with those who hold fundamentally different viewpoints may expose community members to ideas they find offensive, contentious, or objectionable. The University is dedicated to fostering open and respectful intellectual debate whilst protecting the rights of all community members to lawfully test assumptions, challenge viewpoints, and express principled disagreement, recognising that academic excellence flourishes through the respectful exchange of diverse perspectives. We encourage every member of our community to speak up and listen well.*
10. *Free speech enjoys robust protection under English law, and the University is committed to promoting and protecting free speech within legal boundaries and with due regard to the rights and safety of others.*

Once again, faculty at the London campus already operate under a policy that aligns with the legal and institutional standards of the United Kingdom, and this framework has been in place for many years. The Committee did not examine how that policy differs from the Chicago Principles.

Another alternative is that Northeastern could adopt a university-wide statement on rights and responsibilities that sits outside the Faculty Handbook altogether and applies institution-wide. Other institutions have taken this approach. Such a solution would directly address concerns about scope and applicability without adopting a different framework. Indeed, adopting the Chicago Principles would, in effect, move Northeastern's free expression framework outside the Faculty Handbook anyway, raising the question of why this outcome requires the Chicago Principles specifically.

To re-iterate, the committee did not examine Northeastern's existing policies for part-time and international faculty – policies that already explicitly address academic freedom and clearly extend their protections to these faculty groups. Nor did it meaningfully explore alternative policy mechanisms.

Conclusion

In closing, Northeastern does not face a gap in its commitment to free expression; it faces a choice about what kind of university environment it wishes to sustain. The university already possesses a framework that affirms free expression while anchoring it in civility, a framework that aligns with faculty values, protects the conditions necessary for learning, and reflects how academic freedom is actually practiced in teaching, research, and scholarship. Adopting the Chicago Principles would weaken this carefully balanced approach, elevate a model of expression that tolerates disruption and intimidation, and do so without necessity or clear institutional benefit. For these reasons, I urge the Faculty Senate to reaffirm Northeastern's existing Statement on Free Expression and reject adoption of the Chicago Principles.