

Academic Freedom Committee

Faculty Senate Meeting

February 25, 2026



Academic Freedom Ad Hoc Committee 2026

Members:

Louise Walker, Co-chair
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Dee Spencer, *Ex officio*
*D'Amore-McKim School
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Charges:

- **Charge 1** asks us to present best practices for fostering viewpoint diversity, pluralistic learning environments, and belonging;
- **Charge 2** asks whether NEU should adopt the Chicago Principles on academic freedom and free expression
- **Charge 3** concerns the question of defining civility and respectful debate

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Our Approach

- **Research:** Faculty surveys, peer institution research, stakeholder consultation, and scholarship review.
- **Faculty input:** High level of response to open ended questions in November's all-faculty survey. **Thank you!**
- **Context:** Problems are not unique to Northeastern

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Trends and Implications for Higher Ed

42 % Americans have confidence in Higher Ed, Gallup ¹

7 in 10 Americans say Higher Ed is headed in wrong direction, Pew²

7 in 10 Americans have an insular mindset, Edelman ³

62 % American faculty self-censoring , NORC/AAUP⁴

[Jones, J. M. \(2025, July 16\). Gallup¹](#)

[Parker, K. \(2025, October 15\). Pew Research Center.²](#)

[Edelman Trust Institute. \(2026, January 18\). 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer³](#)

[Quinn, R. \(2025, January 9\). Watching their words: U.S. faculty say they're self-censoring. Inside Higher Ed⁴](#)

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Trends and Implications for Northeastern

- 40 %** Northeastern faculty self-censoring in the classroom ¹
- 61 %** Northeastern faculty lack confidence university administration would protect controversial speech ¹
- 253 #** Northeastern (out of 257) in FIRE's Free Speech College Ranking (a 75-place decline to bottom 5) ²

¹ All-Faculty Survey 2026

² [FIRE's 2026 College Free Speech Rankings](#)

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Northeastern Leadership Achievements

#1 Co-ops / Internships, *US News & World Report*

#5 Most innovative schools, *US News & World Report*

Northeastern can meet this challenge!

[US News & World Report 2026](#)¹

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Why it Matters

- **Mission support:** Academic freedom allows faculty to do the work of the core mission of the university - the production of knowledge through research, teaching and learning.
- **Benefits students in classroom:** - a place of shared ideas, opportunity to build collaboration skills, working with people of different views.
- **Prepares for life after college:** Viewpoint diversity, civil discourse and disagreeing productively are key skills needed for success in both professional and civic life.

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Solutions

- **Classroom level:** Supporting academic freedom for faculty and students with practical solutions / training (informed by shared faculty best practices).
- **Institutional level:** Not a panacea – there will be good faith disagreements, solutions offer a positive directional shift
- **Themes:** Supporting best practices, strengthening academic freedom and practicing civility and respectful debate.

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Theme 1: Supporting Best Practices

- 17 recommendations for classroom-level best practices
- Drawn from faculty survey responses
- Grounded in scholarly best practices
- Not one size fits all
- Resolution #1: share with all relevant units

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Theme 2: Strengthening Academic Freedom and Free Expression

Institutional Neutrality

- University refrains from positions outside core mission
- Applies to institutional voice, not to faculty, students, staff
- NEU currently has no such policy (Appendix F)
- Recommended by vote of 5-0, see Resolutions 3 & 4

Chicago Principles

- Deeper, clearer, broader than NEU's current statement
- Civility cannot justify closing off discussion with guardrails
- Clarity for time/place/manner restrictions and heckler's veto
- Applies to all community members
- SGA endorsed November 2025
- Recommended by vote of 4-1, see Resolutions 5, 6 & 7

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Theme 2: Strengthening Academic Freedom and Free Expression

Institutional Neutrality + Chicago Principles

- Maximum academic freedom for individuals
- A clearer framework for difficult cases
- NEU joins a large and diverse group of institutions:
 - nearly 150 have adopted institutional neutrality
 - over 100+ have endorsed the Chicago Principles
- Strengthen NEU's reputation

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Theme 3: Practicing Civility and Respectful Debate

- Civility and respect are important across all campus life
- *Defining* and *regulating* civility and respect is not the right approach
- Instead focus on *practicing*
- 17 best practices include faculty-sourced ideas
- Recommendation: NEU invest in supporting these on campus

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Conclusion

- NEU faces real challenges — along with all of higher ed
- New direction + practical classroom strategies
- Disagreeing constructively: a skill that can be taught
- No miracle solutions, but a meaningful improvement
- Thank you!