

Social Media and Freedom of Speech on Campus

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Project Summary

For the fall quarter 2025, we included a project-based learning component into the course STS 110 “Computing, Data, & Law in the United States.” This class focuses on platform regulation and free speech. Based on the course readings and discussions, students developed a survey to collect data about UC Davis students’ knowledge about and attitudes towards the content moderation practices of social media platforms, their legal foundations, and their impact on freedom of speech as well as about free speech on campus. This process allowed students to put the theoretical knowledge that they had gained through the course readings into practice and to share their insights with the greater student community. The survey project also produced very insightful research data on students’ opinions on these matters.

Impact

Our project’s most direct impact was on the students in STS 110, who created and ran our free speech survey. These students gained real research experience, by developing the survey from question design to analysis, and simultaneously spent a quarter practicing the civic duties that the VOICE Initiative exists to cultivate. STS 110 students articulated positions, weighed each other’s perspectives and deliberated about the requirements for a healthy speech environment on campus and online.

The work also reached the wider student body. Through campus tabling, flyering, and a dedicated social media presence under the "Cow's Got Your Tongue?" banner, students engaged hundreds of their peers in direct conversations about free expression, and the survey itself drew 355 responses. For many respondents, being asked to reflect on when and

where they feel free to speak was itself a prompt to consider their own relationship to campus and online discourse.

Finally, the project produced a rich dataset of campus-specific data on UC Davis students' experiences with free speech. Analyzing this data revealed that roughly half of non-neutral respondents feel uncomfortable voicing opinions in classroom settings and in public campus spaces. Those findings have already catalyzed new partnerships, notably with Institutional Analysis and Student Affairs. Our findings are available to the public [here](#).

Were your project objectives met?

Yes. The first objective in our VOICE project description — “developing a survey to collect data on UC Davis students' knowledge of and attitudes toward the content moderation practices of social media platforms, their legal foundations, and their impact on free speech” — was fully met. Students in STS 110 designed a 35-question instrument, navigated IRB and informed-consent requirements, and collected 355 responses through tabling, flyerling, and social media outreach.

Our second objective — to “better understand the evolving culture of speech among younger generations and identify barriers to open dialogue” — was also partially met. Our results (published [here](#)) revealed clear patterns in student views on free speech, including which campus spaces they felt comfortable sharing their opinions in. However, survey data is limited in identifying *why* students aren't comfortable sharing their opinions — we aim to continue our research with qualitative interviews, to fill in this gap.

The participants in our project were primarily students in STS 110 and the students on campus who took part in our survey. We also interfaced with other campus groups: we presented our results to UC Davis Student Affairs and Institutional Analysis. We're exploring collaboration with both of these organizations to continue this work next year.

40 students in STS 110 worked on the survey project. We received 355 survey responses in total. Our outreach — via social media and the Science & Technology Studies newsletter — likely reached more people, but we are unable to track website and social media traffic.

We are currently working on two papers related to this project. One examines the pedagogy behind implementing this research project in a classroom setting, while the other analyzes the data collected through our survey to provide insights on students' experiences with free speech online and on campus.

We also hope to expand the project beyond its initial scope. Conducting qualitative interviews with students would provide additional context for the survey findings and allow us to better understand the experiences and perspectives behind the quantitative data. We are also exploring the possibility of developing the survey into an annual campus-wide assessment, which would allow us to track changes in students' attitudes over time and evaluate the impact of institutional efforts to foster constructive dialogue. To support the future of this work, we have been in contact with several campus partners interested in continuing the project, including the Office of Institutional Analysis, the ASUCD Innovation and Research Lab, and Student Affairs.