Good Faith Speech:
Exploring Meaning Making and Tensions in Free Speech Practices on Catholic Universities

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1. Introduction

Across the United States, colleges and universities are experiencing a growing and volatile crisis over campus speech. Student protests have led to the cancellation of controversial speakers, faculty have faced discipline or dismissal over classroom comments, and debates over pronoun usage, racial justice, and political expression have ignited national headlines. From Columbia University to Stanford Law to Hamline University, campus speech controversies have increasingly resulted in public spectacle, donor threats, social media firestorms, and political intervention.[1] Meanwhile, state legislatures have introduced or passed bills restricting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, banning "divisive concepts," or mandating viewpoint neutrality, further intensifying scrutiny of how institutions govern expression (Knott & Johnson, 2024). These tensions reflect a deeper fracture in higher education's role in public life, with widespread perceptions that universities are either suppressing dissent or failing to protect vulnerable communities. Amid this polarized and high-stakes environment, Catholic colleges and universities face these pressures with particular complexity.

1.1 The Significance and Dual Mission of Catholic Higher Education

Catholic higher education in the United States comprises a diverse and expansive network of institutions. Catholic colleges and universities in the United States have historically played a vital role in educating the children of poor immigrant communities, particularly those marginalized by mainstream Protestant institutions in the 19th and early 20th centuries (NCR, 2024; CREDO Higher Ed, 2023). Many were founded explicitly to serve working-class Catholic populations (often of Irish, Italian, Polish, and later Latin American descent) offering them access to education, social mobility, and religious formation. As of 2024, there are approximately 240 Catholic degree-granting colleges and universities across the country, enrolling over 700,000 students (Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, n.d.). These institutions range in size, scope, and religious affiliation, but all maintain some connection to the Roman Catholic Church. Many are affiliated with specific religious orders (e.g. the Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, or Sisters of Mercy) each of which brings a distinct charism, or spiritual emphasis, that shapes institutional identity and mission. Others operate under more direct diocesan governance or as independently Catholic institutions without a formal connection to a particular order. This diversity creates a rich but complex ecosystem in which Catholic identity, academic inquiry, and public engagement are continuously negotiated. Understanding this landscape is essential for appreciating the ways Catholic universities interpret and apply their mission in relation to speech and expression.

[1] Valerie Strauss, "Judge Rules ICE Likely Violated Law Detaining Columbia Student Over Protest," Washington Post, May 28, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2025/05/28/mahmoud-khalil-detention-unconstitutional/; Kate Selig, "President, Law School Dean Apologize to Judge Kyle Duncan for Disruption to His Speech," Stanford Daily, March 12, 2023, https://stanforddaily.com/2023/03/12/president-law-school-dean-apologize-to-judge-kyle-duncan-for-disruption-to-his-speech/; WCCO Staff, "Settlement Reached Between Hamline, Former Professor Dismissed over Showing Islamic Art," CBS News Minnesota, April 10, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/settlement-reached-between-hamline-former-professor-dismissed-over-showing-islamic-art/.

Understanding the unique position Catholic universities occupy in speech debates requires attention not only to their historical mission or institutional governance, but also to the underlying philosophical commitments that shape how they conceive of truth, inquiry, and formation. Catholic higher education is not merely a context in which faith and reason coexist and a space where the relationship between them is foundational. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1990), Pope John Paul II's apostolic constitution on Catholic universities, articulates a vision in which Catholic higher education integrates rigorous intellectual inquiry with moral formation, service to the common good, and fidelity to the Church's teaching. It emphasizes the university's dual commitment to academic freedom and Catholic identity, calling institutions to pursue truth through both faith and reason.

Jesuit theologian and philosopher Michael Buckley, SJ, offers one of the most influential articulations of this view, framing the Catholic university as a site of mutual enrichment between the religious and the academic. Buckley (1993) describes the ultimate focus of a Catholic university as rooted in the belief that the religious and the academic are intrinsically related. He articulates this from the perspective as a Jesuit, a member of a Catholic religious order that specifically focuses on the running of schools and said,

> Any movement toward meaning and truth is inchoatively religious. This obviously does not suggest that quantum mechanics or geography is religion or theology; it does mean that the dynamism inherent in all inquiry and knowledge-if not inhibited-is toward ultimacy, toward a completion in which an issue or its resolution finds place in a universe that makes final sense, i.e., in the self-disclosure of God-the truth of the finite. At the same time, the tendencies of faith are inescapably toward the academic. This obviously does not suggest that all serious religion is scholarship; it does mean that the dynamism inherent in faith-if not inhibited-is toward its own understanding, toward its own self-possession in knowledge (p.83).

Although Buckley acknowledges that this mutual development can often be stymied, he presents a powerful image of the Catholic university as a place where faith and knowledge together pursue the ultimate horizon of truth. This framing positions speech and inquiry not simply as functional aspects of education, but as theological acts of meaning-making and development of the human person. This conception deepens and complicates Catholic institutions' responsibilities around speech.

While no two Catholic universities are identical in expression, all should share a foundational commitment to a dual mission of the pursuit of rigorous academic inquiry and the cultivation of moral, spiritual, and communal formation. These values often emerge in mission statements as commitments to truth-seeking, justice, service, and holistic education rooted in the Catholic tradition. Institutions affiliated with religious orders typically express this mission through the lens of their founding charism (e.g. Jesuit focus on discernment and justice, the Mercy tradition's emphasis on care for the marginalized, or the Benedictine call to community and stability). While these shared values create continuity across institutions, their interpretation and implementation vary significantly, shaped by institutional history, local culture, and contemporary challenges.

1.2 Catholic Colleges and the Complexity of Speech & Expression

While Buckley offers a philosophical foundation for the integration of faith and reason, contemporary scholars have taken up the practical implications of this integration in today's fraught speech landscape. Situated at the intersection of moral tradition and intellectual inquiry, Catholic colleges must navigate questions of free expression not only as matters of theological and ethical significance, but also legal and pedagogical concerns. Legal scholar and university counsel Sara E. Gross Methner contends that Catholic institutions may offer a valuable model for navigating today's speech tensions, not by avoiding them, but by holding competing commitments in creative tension. Methner (2019) has pointed to the absence of clarity about the proper scope of universities' autonomy when managing speech tensions as a source of increasing tension in educational stakeholders and a declining public trust in higher education. She argues that Catholic universities offer a distinctive and constructive approach to campus speech tensions by explicitly acknowledging and integrating both free speech and inclusive diversity as essential to their institutional identity. Rather than adopting the U.S. Supreme Court's "balancing" model (which often favors one interest - usually speech - over another), Catholic institutions have historically committed to synthesizing competing values through a shared mission rooted in both ecclesial and academic norms. This dual identity enables Catholic universities to frame speech not simply as a legal issue, but as a matter of moral and communal formation. Methner writes, "Catholic universities acknowledged that Catholic and university were equally essential to their distinctive mission and identity. They committed to embrace and synthesize these competing interests," (2019; 360). Rather than defaulting to the adversarial "balancing" approach, which Methner believes typically results in an imbalance towards freedom of speech over other values, she argues Catholic institutions offer a more integrated vision.

Interestingly, Methner's argument does not clearly fall into either the "speech must be constrained" or "speech must be expanded" camp. Instead, she argues that Catholic colleges neither automatically constrain nor automatically expand speech, but rather continually manage the tension between free expression and inclusive diversity transparently and missionally. In Methner's words, the problem is that too many universities often have confusing or inconsistent policies because of a failure "to clearly articulate the essential nature of both interests to university identity and mission," (2019; 361). She advocates for a model in which speech is not unfettered, but is instead regulated in a principled way that serves the institution's academic and moral commitments.

Methner offers a compelling framework for how Catholic universities *could* approach campus speech that is rooted in synthesis of institutional mission *and* institutional autonomy. But her model does not fully account for the diversity and inconsistency in how Catholic institutions *actually* navigate these tensions. In practice, Catholic colleges vary widely in how they define, implement, and enforce speech policies, often shaped by institutional charism, geographic context, leadership ideology, and external political pressures. For instance In 2024, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) published their annual rankings on free speech in colleges and universities (Stevens, 2023). Of the

twenty lowest ranked schools, eight were Catholic. Another Catholic university, St. Louis University, held the designation of a warning school - ones whose free speech policies were so restrictive, they were evaluated separately. Abortion and reproductive justice - hot button issues for the Catholic Church - were cited as the primary reasons for censure or speech restrictions at many of these schools.

At the same time, other Catholic institutions explicitly link their mission and identity as Catholic to promoting free speech on campus. Xavier University's Mission and Identity office posted on its website that "Xavier's distinctive Jesuit Catholic identity and mission inform and enhance free inquiry and engagement of ideas on our campus; they do not limit it," and said that no topic was off limits to students.[2] Other Catholic institutions, like Georgetown University, have designated free speech spaces. This variability suggests that Catholic education's approach to speech is not monolithic, but deeply contingent. Some Catholic colleges lean heavily on mission to justify restrictions, while others invoke the same language to expand dialogue and engagement.

To understand how these tensions manifest in real-world decision-making, we turned to the lived experiences of campus professionals responsible for interpreting and enacting speech policies at Catholic universities. There can be significant variance across Catholic colleges and universities in how they envision and promote speech and expression in and outside of the classroom, but there can also be institutional conflict about how different administrators and staff enact policy and address speech-related misconduct concerns within the same institution. This project builds on Methner's insight by investigating how Catholic universities actually enact and interpret that vision in the face of real-world challenges, policy constraints, institutional context, and the lived experience of their campus leaders.

[2] (https://www.xavier.edu/mission-identity/xaviers-mission/speech-principles).

2. Objectives

The goal of our research was to examine the ways in which Catholic institutions do (and do not) utilize their mission as a frame for how they create and enforce free speech policies on campus and the potential disconnect or tension points in the creation and implementation process. While some schools point to their missional identity as meaning speech needs to be restricted, others claim that allowing support for speech is part of how they live their mission (Frawley Desmond, 2017). We examined whether these differences in approach are due to topics, region, prestige, or other unknown factors.

Additionally, while there may be an official stance on how the religious identity of an institution shapes its approach to free speech, that does not guarantee that religious values or mission are considered in the writing or implementation of policy. While an institution may articulate an official stance on how its religious identity shapes its approach to free speech, this rarely guarantees that religious values or mission are embedded in policy drafting or enforcement. As James Gordon (2003) observes, institutional academic freedom permits institutions to preserve mission-driven control over speech, but often results in a divergence between mission and practice. Furthermore, those individuals responsible for implementing the policy may also be disconnected from those in charge of compliance, crisis management, conduct adjudication or conflict resolution. Studies of senior faculty at religious universities underscore these functional silos, where governance roles are fragmented and disconnected from institutional identity shepherds (Swezey & Ross, 2010). To gain insight into how administrators at Catholic universities navigate these tensions, we wanted to focus on the meaning-making around speech and expression that occurs for student affairs administrators and mission officers at Catholic universities across the country.

3. Methodology

To investigate how the Catholic mission informs campus speech policy in both theory and practice, we conducted a qualitative phenomenological study centered on the lived experiences of key institutional actors. Specifically, we interviewed Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAO), Mission Officers[3], Deans of Students, and Conduct Officers at Catholic colleges and universities across the United States. Our goal was to understand how these administrators interpreted and enacted their institution's Catholic identity in the context of speech and expression. We were curious particularly whether and how the institution's mission was reflected in the drafting and implementation of speech-related policies. We also examined whether participants perceived a disconnect between formal institutional commitments and the practical realities of policy enforcement, especially in moments of campus controversy or conflict.

We chose a phenomenological approach because our desire as researchers is to give voice to the unique lived experiences of staff who find themself in the middle of increasing challenges and demands around expression and mission on campuses. Our aim was to capture not merely policy outcomes or institutional positions, but the nuanced ways that administrators make meaning in real time often under conditions of ambiguity, pressure, or institutional constraint. Linda Finlay (2006) said that phenomenological research investigates the meaning of the lived experience of a small group of people from the standpoint of a concept or phenomenon. Peter Willis (2007) explained that the focus of phenomenological research is to discover the *perception of reality,* not reality itself and this is key in understanding the ways that people make sense of their lived experiences. By foregrounding administrators' subjective and situated knowledge, this methodology enabled us to surface the often-overlooked tensions, improvisations, and ethical judgments that shape institutional responses to contested expression.

We adopted a phenomenological interview approach to better understand how campus leaders interpret and respond to the tensions between Catholic mission and campus speech. This method enabled participants to share how they make sense of their institutional roles and the meaning they assign to specific experiences. As Irving Seidman (2006) notes, phenomenological interviews invite individuals to reconstruct the narratives that define their engagement with the topic at hand, offering insights grounded in personal reflection and situated knowledge.

In addition to this methodological frame, we drew from feminist approaches to interviewing, which emphasize ethical, collaborative, and reflexive research practices. Building on the work of Gluck and Patai (2016) and Ann Oakley (1981, 2016), we understood feminist interviewing not merely as a technique, but as a commitment to challenging traditional power hierarchies in research. This framework prioritizes empathy, rapport, and attention to the researcher's own positionality, fostering

[3] A campus leader, often at the cabinet level, responsible for advancing the Catholic identity and mission of the institution, often through programming, formation, and consultation. Many are members of the sponsoring religious community that founded the college or university, but many are also lay people.

spaces where participants feel respected and empowered to speak from their experience. Together, the phenomenological and feminist elements of our method created conditions for rich, relational storytelling. This allowed us to surface how administrators experience the moral and political complexities of their roles, particularly when navigating mission-driven identity and institutional responses to contested expression.

Although we did not engage in the high levels of personal disclosure recommended by Fonow and Cook (1991), our interview approach incorporated several key practices drawn from feminist methodology. Central to this was a commitment to reflexivity, an ongoing process of examining how our own identities, positionalities, and assumptions might shape the research design, data collection, and interpretive analysis. As Pillow (2003) emphasizes, reflexivity demands that researchers remain critically aware of their social location and the influence it exerts throughout the research process. We also placed strong emphasis on rapport-building, recognizing that ethical qualitative research—particularly within a feminist framework—requires cultivating environments of psychological safety and mutual respect. In line with Oakley's (2016) guidance, we engaged in informal conversation prior to the start of formal interviews, signaled shared understanding where appropriate (without overstepping ethical boundaries), and ensured that the setting encouraged openness. Through these strategies, we sought to foster interview conditions that honored participants' agency and acknowledged the relational, co-constructed nature of meaning-making in qualitative research.

4. Data Collected

We conducted 39 interviews across three key administrative roles: 14 Senior Student Affairs Officers, 13 Mission Officers, and 12 Conduct Officers. This diverse sampling allowed us to capture perspectives from those directly involved in policy formulation, mission engagement, and behavioral adjudication on Catholic campuses. These roles are the ones that often experience operational tensions between institutional mission and free speech dynamics. Geographically, our interviews were slightly skewed: 19 from the Midwest, 13 from the East Coast/New England, 5 from the West Coast, and only 1 from the South. Nationally, there are 244 Catholic degree-granting institutions across the U.S. Our sample slightly overrepresents the Midwest and East, and underrepresents the South, suggesting that future expansions into Southern institutions could enhance the representativeness of our findings.

Number of Interviews by Position Type	
Senior Student Affairs Officer	14
Mission Officer	13
Conduct Officer	12

Interviews by Location	
Midwest	19
New England / East Coast	13
West Coast	5
South	1

All quotations from interview participants included in this paper have been anonymized. To protect the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms have been assigned to all individuals whose words are directly quoted. These pseudonyms do not reflect participants' actual names or identities, and any identifying details have been modified or omitted where necessary to further safeguard anonymity. This approach aligns with the study's ethical commitment to respecting participants' privacy while authentically representing their perspectives. Where appropriate, it has been indicated if a participant came from a charism-based school as opposed to a diocesan or independent Catholic school, but because of the small size of the sample, the specific founding religious order is not shared.

5. Findings

Having explored the broader context, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approach that shape this study, we now turn to the findings that emerged from our interviews with student affairs professionals, mission officers, and conduct staff across Catholic colleges and universities. These findings illuminate how Catholic institutions navigate the complex tensions between free speech, mission, and institutional identity. Each institutional setting has unique lived realities that are shaped by political climate, institutional culture, and campus concerns. What follows are key themes that reflect both the diversity and the common challenges of Catholic higher education's engagement with speech and expression. Each theme offers insight into how mission is invoked, interpreted, and operationalized in moments of tension, and reveals the opportunities and dilemmas that Catholic colleges face as they strive to balance fidelity to their identity with responsiveness to contemporary campus life.

5.1 Policies and Political Realities

As Catholic institutions attempt to foster campus environments rooted in mission and inclusive of diverse perspectives, they must also navigate the practical terrain of speech-related policies and the shifting political landscapes that surround them. These policies are not merely administrative guidelines - they become lived expressions of institutional values, crafted in response to legal obligations, reputational pressures, and theological commitments. The following section explores how data surfaced the ways in which Catholic colleges and universities approach the regulation of speech through both formal policies and informal practices, and how those choices reflect deeper tensions between legal standards, mission-driven commitments, and the political realities of contemporary higher education.

5.1.1 Orientation Towards Free Speech

Across our interviews, participants expressed a wide range of views on whether the First Amendment provides an appropriate or sufficient standard for guiding speech and expression on Catholic campuses. Some saw the First Amendment's protections as a necessary baseline that ensures the free exchange of ideas and shields institutions from legal and reputational risk. Meg, an SSAO, said, "The First Amendment is our standard." Morgan, a mission officer, said that academic freedom is essential and a special concern of the First Amendment, echoing the work of legal scholar J. Peter Byrne (1989) in "Academic Freedom: A 'Special Concern of the First Amendment.'" Riley, a conduct officer at a charism-based school, said that they tried to avoid restricting any *content* in speech (absent what would qualify as hate speech via federal law) and instead focused on having parameters focus on time, place, and manner. She said, "We're just recommitting to the university's stance on, we value differing ideas, and we want there to be an opportunity for people to to speak within the bounds of the law."

Others argued that relying solely on a First Amendment framework is inadequate for Catholic higher education, where the moral and communal dimensions of speech should also be considered. Sloan, a mission officer at a small charism-based school, said, "Being a private university, we do not hold to, and could never hold, some kind of absolute free speech…there are lines as far as what's tolerated, and there's reasons for that to connect to our mission." Sloan went on to connect this rejection of absolute free speech to the comment of the institution to diversity, equity, and inclusion and anti-racist frameworks, indicating that anything that could be understood as hate speech or discriminatory would have no place on campus.

Notably, these perspectives on free speech as a standard did not neatly align with whether a school was perceived as more progressive or conservative. Endorsement of the First Amendment as a guiding standard also did not correspond neatly to the depth of an administrator's connection to Catholic mission. Several participants who described themselves as deeply committed to the mission of their institution nonetheless advocated for First Amendment principles as essential for fostering dialogue, inquiry, and community life on campus.

Instead, views on the First Amendment seemed to reflect individual administrators' own philosophies, their experiences navigating speech tensions, and their interpretations of how Catholic mission should shape campus dialogue. This diversity underscores the complexity of speech governance in Catholic contexts, where legal, moral, and theological considerations intersect in varied and sometimes contradictory ways. Sam, a former mission officer, encapsulated this nuance when she highlighted that freedom of religion is also an element of the First Amendment and claimed that she believed this means institutions have the right to live out their values. She said,

> I would challenge student affairs professionals to understand the complexity of the situation they find themselves in, because the First Amendment would allow me to forbid a drag show at a Catholic university. But the First Amendment would also protect me if I was at a Catholic university in Florida, from an effort [by the state] to dismantle the DEI office. Because, in both instances, I would be able to say, as a Catholic institution, that I am exercising the freedom of religion.

5.1.2 Risk Aversion & Legal Concerns

Across multiple institutions, participants reported a growing institutional reliance on General Counsel and legal compliance frameworks when navigating speech-related controversies, often at the expense of educational or missional deliberation. Administrators cited a sharp uptick in legal consultation as a first-line response, particularly in light of recent legislation targeting DEI initiatives, mandates for viewpoint neutrality, and federal scrutiny around Title VI compliance. This legalistic turn was often described as preemptive, with universities opting to restrict or tightly manage campus speech not

necessarily because of a concrete threat, but due to the perceived risk of reputational harm, media backlash, or donor withdrawal. Bryce, an SSAO, highlighted the tension he felt between this and the broader mission of Catholic education, saying, "Just because you have to do something or can do something doesn't necessarily mean that's the best for the community's development. I think legal compliance doesn't necessarily necessitate moral development." His observation of the ways in which litigious preoccupations could supersede a more formational approach to speech was echoed by several other participants.

The results are an institutional culture shaped as much (if not more) by liability management than by dialogue or discernment, where speech decisions can often be framed through the lens of risk avoidance rather than educational value or ethical formation. This trend reflects what Guard and Jacobsen (2024) term the "lawyerization" of higher education—a shift in which legal professionals exert increasing influence over campus life and institutional priorities. Similarly, Hutchens and Hephner LaBanc (2024) critique the growing tendency to silo speech decisions within General Counsel offices, warning that an overreliance on legalism crowds out the mission-based and pedagogical dimensions that should define institutional responses to contested speech. In this environment, mission and more formation is sometimes sidelined in favor of legal defensibility for ultimate decisions, contributing to staff frustration and uncertainty. This approach, while understandable given the external pressures institutions face, raises critical questions about whether Catholic colleges are compromising their distinctive commitments to moral reasoning and open inquiry in an effort to remain crisis-proof.

Beyond the increasing reliance on General Counsel, participants expressed frustration with the breakdown of institutional consistency in the implementation of speech-related policies. Several participants highlighted the absolute necessity of consistently applied policies to make speech and expression manageable on campus. Shiloh, an SSAO, said that adherence to internal policy was the primary determinant of how speech and expression was handled on campus. She said, "If the student has governed him or herself according to the policy that we have outlined, then there should be no issue relative to affording that student a platform to express him or herself or themselves. So I think that's the most important part."

While many campuses had formal policies or procedures in place (often the product of collaborative, mission-informed processes) those policies were frequently ignored, overruled, or circumvented when cases became high-profile or politically sensitive. Several administrators described scenarios in which decisions made in accordance with stated protocols were later overturned by presidential leadership, trustees, or legal counsel due to external pressure or reputational concerns. This pattern contributed to a sense of procedural instability, where frontline staff were tasked with making principled decisions only to have them reversed after the fact. Meg, an SSAO, colorfully said that the work around speech and expression on campus would be much easier "if we would just follow the damn policy that we wrote the first time rather than panicking when there is any pushback."

The result was both demoralizing and confusing, leading some professionals to question the purpose of developing policy at all if it could be set aside so readily. Bryce, an SSAO, expressed that many staff he worked with struggled with the sudden unilateral overturning of policy by individuals like trustees or bishops, but said that he personally tried to remain pragmatic about it. He said,

> Their perspective is one that we need to acknowledge and frequently impacts our decisions right? That's an unpopular perspective, because it isn't as linear as I think some of our staff desire it to be…for example, 'when we have a policy, you're sticking to that policy.' Well, the President is still going to call you and say, we're not doing that.

This undermining of internal governance not only strained trust among staff, but also raised concerns about institutional credibility and the perceived legitimacy of mission-driven decision-making. The overreach by senior leadership or legal actors, often in the interest of risk mitigation, ultimately weakened the very policies that were designed to provide clarity and coherence in navigating contested speech. Alex, a mission officer, said their university's reliance on the judgement of university counsel was both rooted in a fear based approach and dangerously unconnected to direct experience with campus climate. When asked who makes decisions around speech on campus, Alex said,

> Okay, so who's currently deciding that? Our head of general counsel, whose job is *not* that. That is not her job description. She should certainly weigh in as an attorney, because she's got particular expertise. [Deciding speech and expression policy] is not her job. But we have given her a lot of power in this… and she has absolute influence and impact on our president, who is then impacting and influencing our VP for student affairs very directly. So he is afraid of the president. The president is kind of afraid of counsel and this is how we function. There is a committee that's full of folks that I wouldn't trust with a lot of things because they're not long term thinkers. They don't actually have hands-on experience.

5.1.3 Conduct Processes

Another important finding from our study was the notable variability in how institutions structured their student conduct processes and that the variability that did not necessarily align with how permissive or restrictive they were around campus speech. Some institutions emphasized restorative justice approaches in conduct, using frameworks that prioritized reflection, repair, and community dialogue when students crossed behavioral lines. These campuses often described their conduct systems as mission-aligned tools for student formation, echoing restorative models that aim to heal harm rather than simply punish. "Trying to help people kind of practice, discernment or reflection… how we help people think and act and reflect on what they say, I think that's really important for our work in student conduct," said Lennon, a conduct officer.

In contrast, other institutions maintained more traditional, punitive conduct structures, emphasizing rule enforcement, sanctions, and behavioral compliance. Yet this orientation toward discipline did not consistently predict how those same institutions approached speech and expression. Some colleges with restorative conduct models nevertheless adopted restrictive policies around controversial speakers or student activism. Some campuses with more punitive conduct systems tolerated a broader range of speech, viewing expression as a protected domain distinct from behavioral governance.

This divergence suggests that while Catholic mission language often permeates both speech and conduct policies, its application can be highly compartmentalized. Decisions about speech permissiveness and conduct structure were shaped as much by institutional history, leadership preferences, and external pressures as by coherent mission-driven logic.

5.1.4 Lack of Training Or Assessment

Despite the complexities and high stakes surrounding campus speech, most Catholic institutions in our study had no formal processes in place to assess the efficacy of their speech-related policies. Administrators reported that while policies often existed on paper (frequently the product of thoughtful, intentional, collaborative drafting efforts), there was little follow-up to evaluate how these policies functioned in practice or whether they advanced the institution's educational and missional goals. This lack of formal assessment contributed to uncertainty about whether policies supported moral formation, dialogue, and inclusion, or whether they inadvertently stifled constructive engagement. None of the participants reported their campus engaged in formal assessment specifically examining speech and expression. Zion, a mission officer, shared that her campus would engage in ongoing broad campus climate assessment regarding belonging and that speech may occasionally present itself in their data, but that she did not find it possible to draw conclusions about student's understanding around speech. Rory, a mission officer, expressed that he was unaware of any formal assessment of the speech and expression environment on campus and reflected that this might be helpful in determining whether or not campus culture had an unintentional chilling effect on speech. He said,

> I worry that the University's great emphasis on our Catholic character and Catholic mission does mute some some people's experience of their ability to freely express themselves on controversial issues that are not in line with church teaching. I do not believe that our policies call for that, but that sort of de facto, people are inhibited. But our campus culture, I think, does lead some to say, 'I'm just going to keep my head down on these matters and keep things out of work.' I think that's unfortunate. I wish we asked about that.

When asked what programming existed to train or form students around speech and expression on campus, the responses typically fell into three buckets - the absence of a program, a new initiative to include speech and expression as part of orientation, or a reference to speech and expression in

a values seminar as a current part of orientation. Of note, most of the interviews for this study were conducted in summer and fall of 2024 in the wake of the previous year's record level of demonstrations across the country on campuses in response to the conflict between Israel and Gaza. Many of the administrators we interviewed described either major policy revisions or conversation about implementing new programs. When asked about current offerings, many were honest that little formal preparation existed, with Alex, a mission officer, saying, "How do we expect students we've trained poorly to be able to do [speech and demonstration on campus] effectively?"

Some staff members pointed to sessions during orientation for students that address university values more broadly as a place where conversation around speech and expression was occurring. Cary, a conduct officer, said that this focus on speech and expression had been added to already existing orientation programming, but was skeptical on whether or not this would be enough or something students could absorb in an already busy week.

Similarly, training for staff and faculty on speech and expression was often limited to mission-based orientation sessions, with few opportunities for deeper, ongoing development. These orientation sessions tended to focus on broad principles of institutional values rather than practical strategies for navigating the tensions between free expression, Catholic identity, and community responsibility. As a result, student affairs professionals, mission officers, and conduct staff were frequently left to rely on personal judgment or ad hoc collaboration when conflicts arose, a pattern that further contributed to inconsistency and, at times, institutional confusion. Addressing these gaps presents a critical opportunity for Catholic universities to align training and assessment practices more closely with their mission and with the demands of contemporary campus life. Rory, a mission officer, said that his office works with faculty to help them understand that "We are a Catholic university, and there are opportunities and responsibilities that come with that. But nothing in that minimizes your free expression." These "opportunities and responsibilities" often refer to the unique position of Catholic universities to uphold both academic freedom and a distinct moral and religious worldview. The tension between these commitments (especially as they relate to the speech and expression of faculty) will be explored more fully in later sections of this paper.

5.1.5 Geographic & Political Context

Participants consistently noted that geographic and political context significantly shaped how their institutions approached speech and expression. In states with restrictive legislation, (such as Leonard's Law in California, which requires private colleges to uphold First Amendment standards) administrators described operating within legal frameworks that limited their discretion in managing campus speech (Kaplin & Lee, 2020). Similarly, institutions in states where lawmakers have introduced or passed measures restricting DEI programs, banning "divisive concepts," or mandating viewpoint neutrality reported heightened scrutiny of speech-related decisions (Knott & Johnson, 2024). Sloan, a mission officer, noted that recent local anti-DEI legislation had led to his institution having to

continually point to their longstanding commitment to equity and inclusion and push back against constraints. Sloan said, "We're trying really hard to say that we've got a longstanding historical precedent and frankly moral mandate to ensure that the voices of all are able to be heard with the privileging of those who are marginalized who don't have access to social privilege and power."

Whether or not the school was located in an urban or more regionally liberal region often played a large role on how speech and expression was handled on campus, even at schools who espoused themselves to be more doctrinally conservative. Administrators at schools located in major urban centers or in generally liberal regions shared that, regardless of their institution's internal stance on contentious topics, they were aware that students (and often faculty and staff) expected a higher level of speech freedom and expression around issues such as reproductive justice, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial equity.

This often led to one of two approaches. Avery, a longtime SSAO at a school that she described as being more doctrinally conservative and restrictive around speech in an major urban center, shared that students were often encouraged to go beyond campus to engage in actions, protests, and events with larger community groups around particular topics where they would be able engage their speech and expression topics more freely. "It would often be a matter of finding a delicate way to say, 'You just can't have those conversations *here*, but you should be asking those questions,' to students," said Avery. She believed that this led to students still being able to express themselves, engage in dialogue, and make important connections with groups in the larger urban center the school was located in. At the same time, she wondered if it also led to a perception of less diversity of thought being present in students because those students not in alignment with Church teaching were expressing their opinions off campus.

Being in major urban centers also led other schools to be more lenient than their sponsoring order or alumni may have been comfortable with. Jordan said, "We could not be a school that reflected [urban center] and not have support for our LGBTQ students. It would be nonsensical and would make us seem wildly out of touch in the place where we are." He also admitted that this may not have been the case if his school was located in a more rural area. "If you'd pick up [school name] and dropped us in the middle of a cornfield, like some other schools, our policies may have started to shift," said Jordan.

Overall, many of the participants who had worked at more than one Catholic university, especially when they were in different regions, highlighted the need for administrators to be aware of regional cultural differences and not assume that their own way of proceeding was standard. Jamie, an SSAO, shared that she found more people spoke openly of religious belief at a state school she worked at in the South than some of the Catholic schools she worked at in other areas. Bryce, an SSAO, described the regional mores as being an informal influence that often impacted policy and campus culture, but was hard to cleanly categorize.

5.2 Experiences of Practitioners

Beyond institutional context and political realities, individual practitioners' own experience, confidence, and relationships also played a crucial role in how they responded to speech and expression situations on campus. As our interviews revealed, the ability to manage the emotional complexity of speech-related conflicts (and to support students through them) was often shaped by a practitioner's professional maturity, connection to the mission, and the degree of trust and collaboration they shared with colleagues.

5.2.1 Professional Experience & Distress Tolerance

We also observed that participants' approaches to campus speech tensions were often notably shaped by their level of professional experience as well as the quality of collaboration between mission and student affairs divisions. As mentioned earlier, newer professionals, especially in student-facing roles, often reported lower confidence in navigating ambiguity, particularly when dealing with speech that intersected with contentious Church teachings or student activism. These professionals expressed uncertainty about how to balance student development, institutional policy, and Catholic identity, often fearing that missteps could result in personal or professional consequences. In contrast, seasoned professionals were more likely to approach these situations with confidence and flexibility, drawing on deeper institutional memory and a stronger capacity to integrate restorative practices with mission-based reasoning. Many described using moments of tension as opportunities for discernment and ethical formation rather than mere rule enforcement.

5.2.2 Relationship Between Mission and Student Affairs

Across institutions, the strength of the relationship between student affairs leaders and mission officers emerged as a key variable. Where those relationships were strong (sometimes even rooted in personal friendship) there was a clear sense of shared purpose and mutual investment in embedding mission into student life. These teams approached their work with camaraderie and alignment, framing campus controversies as opportunities for holistic formation. Harper, a mission officer, articulated how grateful he was for the close working relationship he had with other leaders at his institution and said,

> I work very closely with the VP [in student affairs], as well as our VP for diversity, equity, inclusion. So the three of us kind of work really well together. So we're constantly keeping each other posted about things to make sure that we're all on the same page. And I think, for the most part, we really are. I often say we kind of share the same brain and heart when it comes to this stuff, which is, I'm grateful for, because I know that's not always the case right?

In contrast, where that relationship was less articulated, there seemed to be more ambiguity about how much support student affairs believed that mission officers would give them. Some mission officers assumed that student affairs had speech-related matters under control and offered little input unless explicitly asked. Conversely, some student affairs professionals perceived mission officers as reactive figures, brought in only to resolve crises or enforce Church boundaries, rather than as collaborators invested in student development. "We engage them [the mission office] if it's clearly a religious identity related, but we normally can just rely on student affairs best practice," said Marcus, an SSAO.

Some student affairs professionals, particularly those earlier in their careers, often expressed a heightened sense of vulnerability when navigating topics perceived to be in tension with official Catholic Church teaching. Many described a sense of apprehension that if they allowed or supported events, speakers, or student groups that explored issues like reproductive justice, LGBTQ+ identity, or interfaith dialogue, they might face institutional pushback or scrutiny for appearing to endorse ideas outside Church doctrine and saw that the identity and mission of the school primarily dictated what could NOT be said. Teagan, a mission officer, believed that some of this perceived tension, especially from professionals who were newer to Catholic education may come from a lack of understanding of the complexity of the mission of institutions. She said,

> I think part of the reality is, a lot of our institutions are far more liberal and progressive and so there are certain political positions that take a certain flavor as the dominant flavor at our institution and that are seen by many in the community as in alignment with our mission, especially commitment to social justice - which is a nice word that's more complex than we sometimes deploy it.

5.3 Catholic Doctrine, Church Leadership, and Campus Expression

While student affairs professionals often felt the tension most acutely in co-curricular spaces and student programming, the concerns of mission officers around speech and expression and Catholic identity and doctrinal fidelity were frequently directed elsewhere, particularly toward faculty and invited speakers. Our interviews saw mission officers shift focus from student-facing decisions to questions of academic content and public representation. Mission officers described distinct challenges in ensuring that Church teaching was accurately conveyed and thoughtfully integrated. These tensions revealed another layer of complexity in how Catholic institutions manage expression: one rooted not in interpersonal collaboration, but in the broader dynamics of authority[4], interpretation, and institutional reputation.

[4] In Catholic context, refers to both ecclesial authority (*e.g.*, bishops, magisterium) and institutional governance.

When it came to engaging with sensitive topics like abortion, LGBTQIA rights, etc, in interviews mission officers tended to focus their concerns more squarely on faculty, particularly around how Catholic identity and teaching were presented in the classroom. They described ongoing tensions with faculty who either refused to present Church teaching accurately (choosing instead to dismiss, undermine, or avoid it) or who were openly hostile to the university's religious mission. Asa, a former mission officer, compared it to inviting someone over to dinner to your house only to have them throw mud on the walls. Kendall, another mission officer, talked at length about the consideration that needed to be given to invited speakers or award recipients. "Are you inviting them for an event to speak? What sort of platform are you giving them? So it might be that somebody is invited to speak about topic X. Topic Y, which is a subject they also hold opinions about, is where the issue is, but that's not why they're here," said Kendall.

A few mission officers emphasized that their primary concern was not the presence of alternate viewpoints, but rather the integrity of how Church teaching was represented. Asa, a former mission officer, said, "I think the greater framework, or certainly concern that emerges among the bishops is who speaks for the church? And how is the Church represented in that conversation?" She was also quick to say that the Catholic Church's opinion did not need to be the only viewpoint represented in conversations and events on campus, but it was important to know that it was represented accurately and with respect. Several mission officers noted that students, as individuals in formation, should be expected to explore, question, and investigate difficult topics. Asa said,

> I mean, undergraduates are humans in formation. Right? I mean, I can be much more tolerant and engaged with a young person who, whatever the issue, if it's homelessness, if it's premarital sex, if it's sexual identity. I mean, that's part of the task of young adulthood is figuring out those things. 'What do I believe about it? Who am I in conversation?' and I absolutely think university is the place for that.

The critical issue, in their view, was ensuring that such exploration occurred in *honest* dialogue with the tradition, rather than in isolation or misrepresentation.

The influence of local bishops in Catholic higher education further complicates the landscape of speech and expression. Bishops are the leaders of Catholic dioceses and their own role is understood as the primary "teacher" or spiritual authority in the region. The role of bishops and Church authorities in Catholic higher education is framed as both pastoral and essential. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1990), Pope John Paul II's apostolic constitution on Catholic universities, elaborates on this role.[5] The document also insists that, "Bishops should be seen not as external agents but as participants in the life of the Catholic University" (John Paul II, 1990, Art. 5 §1), underscoring a vision of cooperative governance. However, this vision is complicated by the concrete authority that bishops possess: "each Bishop has a responsibility to promote the welfare of the Catholic Universities in his diocese and has the right and duty to watch over the preservation and strengthening of their Catholic character" (Art. 5 §2).

[5] This document will engage in a richer and more in-depth discussion of *Ex Corde* later on.

In contemporary contexts, this can produce a tension between local episcopal oversight and institutional autonomy, particularly when bishops interpret Catholic identity through narrow doctrinal or ideological lenses. Faculty and administrators may feel constrained in their decision-making, especially when confronted with episcopal disapproval related to speakers, events, curriculum content, or faculty views. Furthermore, this authority is rarely reciprocal; the voices of lay scholars, faculty senates, or students often hold less formal weight in defining the Catholic identity they are tasked with embodying. In this way, the very structure that *Ex Corde* proposes as collaborative may, in practice, cause a hierarchical imposition of values that limits the range of permissible discourse.

Our interviews also revealed further complexity. Asa, a former mission officer, said she often wondered how often some bishops were being invited to campus or engage with faculty. "If a campus is doing wonderful things around sustainability and *Laudato Si*[6], does the bishop know about it? Is he invited to campus for those events? Or is he only hearing about a school from angry parent phone calls?" said Asa. Bryce, an SSAO, said that some SSAOs or university presidents made the mistake of dismissing or considering their campus' relationship to the local bishop more of a nuisance, whereas he believed negotiating it was an essential skill set to do students affairs work effectively. "It's really about appreciating the nuance of that relationship and how it impacts your practice. I think it's a fundamental skill for student affairs leaders to have when they work in decision making roles at Catholic institutions," said Bryce.

Participants also reported that decisions around speech, curriculum, or public events were often shaped as much by assumptions about potential diocesan responses as they were by direct episcopal involvement or requests. As one mission officer reflected, the quality of relationship with the local bishop deeply influenced institutional confidence in navigating challenging conversations. Reese, a mission officer, said,

> I think there is a difference, too, in terms of relationship with your local ordinary with the bishop. So because I've been in different diocesan spaces where what I just described is like a real deep partnership with the university and the church was practiced…and then others where it's kind of, 'Let's stay in your lane.' So where there's a close working relationship with the bishop, there's been a sense of partnership and inviting into challenging conversations. In other diocesan contexts, that's been more of a … concern of like, is this going to raise, you know, alarm or concerns from the diocese?

Ellis, another mission officer, said that fear of upsetting the bishop often led to preemptive censorship by upper administration of student speech and expression at her institution. This frustrated her because often this was done based on no actual evidence or conversation with the diocese.

[6] Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical on environmental justice, integral ecology, and care for creation.

> The president is in a panic that the bishop will be furious about something so we tamp things down and tell students no, no, no. But no one in our administration takes the time to see if it is even something that would upset him personally, let alone if it is actually against tradition. Often it is no on both accounts.

Ellis believed this reactivity from the President was in part because of anxieties about the financial state of the school and worries that upsetting the bishop would lead to financial repercussions - beliefs which she did think were fully founded.

Overall, while speech-related controversies related to the school's Catholic identity[7] involving students did arise, mission officers were more frequently preoccupied with faculty conduct and its implications for institutional identity and theological coherence. An additional layer of divergence among mission officers emerged in their invocation (or absence) of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition[8] (CIT) when addressing speech and expression. Hollenbach (2003) notes that the Catholic Intellectual Tradition refers to the body of thought, inquiry, and dialogue that has emerged over two millennia as the Catholic Church has engaged with questions of truth, meaning, and human flourishing. It is characterized by a commitment to the integration of faith and reason, the pursuit of universal truth, and the belief that human intellect and moral discernment are gifts meant to serve the common good. This tradition draws on several philosophical and theological schools as well as science, literature, and the arts. It is seen as affirming that rigorous intellectual inquiry and critical reflection are not only compatible with faith, but essential to its full expression. For some, the CIT served as a foundational framework, offering a robust rationale for engaging controversial topics with both rigor and reverence. These administrators spoke of the tradition as a living resource that encourages critical inquiry, integrates faith and reason, and invites dialogue across differences. They viewed it as a tool not for restriction, but for forming students and faculty in habits of discernment and thoughtful engagement. Reese, a mission officer, mentioned speech and expression as tied to CIT and said,

> We're engaging the kind of core teachings and practices and traditions of the Catholic faith in the work that we do. When we think about the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, we're called to like thoughtfully, critically engage that in both kind of faith and reason... that's the reality for how we... host spaces of dialogue in speech.

[7] These included student protests over invited speakers seen as contrary to Catholic teaching, disputes over LGBTQ+ rights and gender identity language in campus policies, and faculty members facing scrutiny for classroom comments perceived as politically or doctrinally provocative. In some cases, tensions arose when students or staff publicly challenged Church authority or institutional responses to racial injustice. Rather than isolated incidents, these reflect moments where institutional commitments to mission, identity, and intellectual freedom are tested in public and often politicized ways.

[8] The Catholic Intellectual Tradition refers to the ongoing dialogue between faith and reason rooted in the Catholic Church's engagement with broader disciplines of philosophy, science, theology, and the liberal arts over two millennia. Bernard V. Brady described it as linking, "the work of a contemporary college to a practice that has existed since the earliest centuries of the Church. Christianity, indeed the Bible itself, is characterized by a certain respect for and at times a convergence with other cultures and communities. Underlying this history is a basic affirmation of human wisdom and the human ability, independent of one's faith tradition, to know the good, the true, and the beautiful," (2013, p. 190).

However, this framing was far from universal. Other mission officers rarely, if ever, referenced the broader Catholic Intellectual Tradition in their approach to speech, instead grounding their decisions in institutional policy, pastoral concern, or institutional charism. In several cases, individuals appeared more comfortable speaking about their institution's charism than invoking broader Church teaching or theological frameworks. Beyond mission officers, some participants who worked at charism-based schools would often speak about the charism as though it was fully separate from the Catholic Church around speech and expression. Riley, a conduct officer, said, "I do think we lean more on the [charism mission] than we do on being Catholic, although it depends on the context of the situation and what maybe like what leadership is present."

This preference may reflect the relative accessibility of charism as a mission resource, particularly in institutions with strong religious community roots or a history of emphasizing service and hospitality. In some cases, this absence may reflect varying levels of theological training or institutional emphasis, while in others, it may signal a broader shift away from explicitly intellectual or tradition-based rationales for speech governance. The inconsistency suggests that while the Catholic Intellectual Tradition remains a powerful resource for some, it is not a uniformly deployed or understood lens across institutions or even among those explicitly tasked with upholding mission.

5.3.1 Charism Variance and Impact

Across institutions, the specific charism of a college or university significantly influenced how mission was invoked in matters of speech and expression. While all Catholic institutions share a general ecclesial identity, participants highlighted how distinct charisms shaped institutional priorities, tone, and the language used to frame difficult conversations. Campuses rooted in charisms emphasizing community, justice, or accompaniment were more likely to reference when navigating controversial issues, using mission language to open space for dialogue and discernment. Reese, a mission officer, pointed to their school's charism as foundational to building a space for dialogue.

> We held these vigils for peace and nonviolence… one of the ways that we could do that most meaningfully was… a space that was inviting [our charism] to be the foundation. Those became spaces where we kind of invited the spirit to hold something that we can't bear on our own.

At the same time, the presence of charism did not guarantee that mission would be the center point of policies around speech and expression. Zion, a mission officer at a charism-based school, talked about the importance of "mission density" at an institution and the challenge of making sure that enough people cared about and considered mission in their work. The level of involvement in policy drafting and decisions making around speech and expression for mission officers varied widely across our participants. Some were in the room when policies were being revised. Others would be given the opportunity to look over a final draft of policies. Still others would only be consulted if a speech consideration directly impacted religious identity.

Institutions with less emphasis on charism sometimes favored order, doctrine, or authority as guiding frames. Institutions without a clearly defined or consistently referenced charism often struggled to articulate a coherent vision of mission, which in turn complicated their approach to speech and expression. Avery, an SSAO at a school without a charism, said, "I think it's the lack of the charism that leads to a lack of overall direction. How do they define [the mission of the school]? So they define faithfully Catholic as being very strict and to the teachings."

In the absence of a strong framework, administrators at these schools sometimes defaulted to focus on not upsetting the local bishop, alumni, or trustees. This left staff uncertain about how to apply mission meaningfully in contested situations. This lack of clarity created challenges in justifying decisions about controversial speakers, student activism, or classroom discourse, particularly when external actors (such as donors or diocesan officials) questioned the institution's alignment with Catholic identity.[9]

At some institutions, mission was described as a living ethos that actively shaped programming and student formation; at others, it was referenced only selectively or reactively, especially when an incident risked external scrutiny. This inconsistency suggests that Catholic identity is not a monolithic force across the sector, but one mediated by theological heritage, leadership interpretation, and campus culture. As a result, what one institution interprets as a mission-aligned response to controversial speech, another may view as a violation of its core values, revealing deep pluralism in how Catholic colleges understand their public responsibilities.

5.3.2 The Common Good Versus Individual Formation

Another notable distinction across institutions was how they framed the purpose of speech and its relationship to the Catholic mission, particularly in the tension between the common good and individual moral or intellectual formation. On campuses where the common good was frequently invoked, the emphasis was less on restricting specific topics and more on fostering environments where speech contributed to communal well-being. Administrators at these institutions encouraged students to consider how their words affected others. It was not simply whether an idea was controversial that was important, but whether it was expressed in a way that upheld dignity, invited dialogue, and supported the formation of a just community. Speech was understood through a relational lens: not as an unfettered right, but as a responsibility exercised within the context of community. Sloan, a mission officer, couched freedom of speech as an "inherent good of Catholic education," but also said it had to consider its impacts on the community, especially those with marginalized identities. He said, "At the same time we have to help people understand where that collides with the experience, the well-being, and the safety of people who carry a variety of intersecting diversities."

[9] This questioning was often more likely to be based on what donors personally thought should be appropriate at a Catholic college rather than accurately reflecting church teaching.

Skylar, an SSAO, gave a concrete example of the ways that the school sought to balance the rights to speech and expression and community well being through the use and comfortability of space. On her campus there is a particular area that is often the epicenter for both student expression and general community gatherings.

> It's a place where students gather and protest and it's also a place where students buy [street food]. When we are freaking out as a community, my measure is not the protests, it's the food. So if I can go and hear chants and disruption, but still see and smell [street food], and see a long line of students getting some, then we're okay right now…I can smell them. I can go around the protest and get in line and still have a place in my community.

A common good framework highlights that limits on speech or formational conversations around speech are not meant to be censorship, but rather invitations to deeper discernment about the impact of expression on belonging, justice, and care. Jordan, an SSAO at a smaller, charism-based institution, expressed, "This is not about what you can and cannot say - it's about the impact it has on other people in the community." Jordan shared that community impact was the starting point from which they worked with students around speech and expression, asking them to thoughtfully consider what environment their comments would create for fellow students. He said that when he was able to lead students through the exercise in imaginative empathy, students would often preemptively adjust the language they planned to use in events or become more open to revising their events.

By contrast, other campuses focused more narrowly on the individual's moral and intellectual development, emphasizing personal conscience, critical thinking, and the exploration of ideas as intrinsic goods. While both approaches are rooted in Catholic values, the former positioned speech within a communal ethic, while the latter leaned toward a more autonomous, interior model of formation. This divergence shaped how institutions responded to controversial events, with some prioritizing restorative community practices and others emphasizing the importance of individual voice and exploration, even when disruptive. Jamie, an SSAO, said that Catholic education's commitment to having education extend to impact the full person's development and not just their educational attainment meant engaging with complex and thorny issues directly. Therefore a commitment to intellectual formation of students was part of the commitment to moral formation and thus connected to freedom of expression. Jamie said, "People will occasionally write emails to our office and say 'How can you be a Catholic institution and allow this?' But my response is if you truly believe in freedom of expression as important… how could we not?"

Beyond differing approaches to individual versus communal models of speech, a deeper philosophical divergence emerged in how institutions framed the very purpose of student formation. While many campuses articulated speech practices through the lens of moral or ethical development, far fewer positioned expression as part of a broader civic mission. One of the most striking findings from our study was the overwhelming emphasis that Catholic institutions placed on ethical formation (the cultivation of individual students' internal moral reasoning, discernment, and character) over civic

formation, which focuses more broadly on democratic engagement and participation in community life. Across 39 interviews, terms related to ethical formation appeared over 74 times, while explicit references to civic formation and democracy, including concepts like voter engagement or public service, surfaced only twice.

This emphasis on ethical formation was also typically tied to Catholic mission. Administrators frequently described moral reasoning, values-based decision-making, and ethical responsibility as central to how speech and expression should function on campus. They rarely framed speech as a right to be protected, but rather as a responsibility to be exercised in ways that promote individual growth, justice, and communal well-being (Gallin, 2000). Institutions often positioned speech programs and related policies as vehicles for moral development and discernment rather than as tools for preparing students to navigate or contribute to democratic society.

By contrast, the relative absence of civic formation language (such as direct references to democracy, public participation, or voter engagement) was notable. This gap raises important questions about whether civic engagement at Catholic universities is perceived as less mission-aligned or whether hesitancy stems from political sensitivities in polarized contexts. Catholic higher education has long acknowledged a responsibility to prepare students for civic life (Hollenbach, 2003). Yet in practice, our data suggest this dimension is often subordinated to the internal work of conscience and moral development.[10]

[10] The emphasis Catholic institutions place on ethical formation often intersects with their long-standing commitment to community service and volunteerism, traditions rooted in Catholic social teaching's call to solidarity and the preferential option for the poor. Many Catholic universities have historically required or encouraged students to engage in service as part of their moral and spiritual development. However, one of the authors is a community-based learning scholar and wonders if the traditional link to service at Catholic schools may be reflecting a broader critique of the sometimes apolitical nature of community service on campuses. As scholars of service-learning have pointed out, this model of engagement can fall short of fostering genuine civic formation or political agency. Critics argue that service-learning at religious and secular institutions alike often prioritizes personal moral growth and charity over structural analysis or civic action, leading to what Mitchell (2008) terms "apolitical service-learning" — experiences that address symptoms of injustice without interrogating their systemic causes. This critique may help explain the relative absence of civic formation language in our findings or point to a co-occurring factor. While participants readily described how speech should contribute to students' moral discernment, they rarely discussed speech as a vehicle for preparing students to engage in democratic life or challenge structural injustice. As Stoecker and Tryon (2009) note, service risks becoming a tool for individual reflection rather than collective action unless it is intentionally designed to promote critical civic engagement. This dynamic may reflect a broader tension in Catholic higher education between fostering internal moral development and preparing students for public, political participation.

6. Models of Mission Expressed in the Data

The findings outlined above highlight the diverse and often contested ways Catholic colleges and universities navigate speech and expression through the lenses of mission, charism, governance structures, and institutional context. Across these themes, a deeper pattern emerges: Catholic mission is not a static or universally applied force in shaping campus speech, but rather a dynamic, interpretive resource that administrators engage in varied and sometimes contradictory ways. As we listened to campus leaders describe their experiences, it became clear that while practices varied widely, their narratives reflected recurring patterns in how Catholic mission was invoked, interpreted, and applied. From these interviews, we identified three broad models of mission engagement that help make sense of these patterns: *mission as obstacle*, *mission as tool*, and *mission as container*.[11]

This typology offers a practical framework for understanding how institutions draw on mission language and identity in their speech-related decisions, not as rigid categories, but as tendencies that shape and reflect institutional *habitus*. By articulating these models, we aim to provide campus leaders and practitioners with a lens for critically examining their own approaches and identifying opportunities for greater coherence, intentionality, and alignment between mission and speech governance. These models (mission as obstacle, mission as tool, and mission as container) offer insight into the rhetorical and operational logics that shape decision-making and reveal both the possibilities and challenges of Catholic mission in contemporary higher education.

These models are not mutually exclusive, and institutions often navigate among them depending on leadership, context, or controversy. Understanding these models helps clarify the underlying philosophical and operational approaches shaping institutional responses to speech. Each model offers both generative and constraining possibilities and should not be mistaken as stable categories, but rather rhetorical and operational tendencies. Each model reflects different assumptions about the purpose and function of the mission in moments of speech-related tension, and each carries its own possibilities and limitations. By naming these models, we hope to offer institutions a resource for reflection that can help critically assess how mission is invoked in their own contexts and how it might be engaged more thoughtfully in the service of both institutional identity and the common good.

[11] Our approach to developing this typology was shaped by our own scholarly backgrounds: it reflects Leslie's training in the sociology of higher education and inhabited institutionalism, which emphasizes how institutional actors enact and give meaning to organizational values in context, and Susan's grounding in theology and inspired by Avery Dulles's *Models of the Church* (which highlights the multiple, coexisting ways to describe what the Catholic Church is and how it functions). These models helped us recognize and name the different ways mission functions in moments of speech-related tension in Catholic universities.

6.1 Mission as Obstacle

In this model, mission is primarily invoked as a fixed object that complicates action and must be navigated around. From this view mission primarily called for limitations on certain speakers, events, or expressions. Institutions in this category treat mission less as a dynamic force for reflection and more as a constant constraint they must creatively manage. Rather than something that promotes discernment or dialogue, mission is treated as a static authority that precludes discussion on contentious topics. Importantly, this model surfaced across both traditional and progressive institutions. At more traditional colleges, mission was described as a clear, non-negotiable standard that prohibited engagement with topics seen as contrary to Church teaching (such as reproductive justice, LGBTQ+ rights, etc). "That's just not the sort of event we're going to be having at a place like [campus]," said Ruby, an SSAO. "The mission is not going to allow us to talk about that here. We're not that place." Ruby also described their campus as having a very curated approach to the student experience that contributed to and potentially necessitated curtailing of speech and expression.

Administrators at more progressive-leaning schools often voiced similar concerns, but from a different angle. They characterized the mission as out of step with contemporary realities, and described it as only constraining the work of student affairs. Marcus, an SSAO said, "Sometimes you just have to find a way to work around it if you want to do the job effectively. Mission is not often in touch with the political moment." While such a frame may protect institutions from external criticism or internal unrest, it can undermine the Catholic Intellectual Tradition's call for rigorous inquiry and openness to truth-seeking.

The presence of the *Mission as Obstacle* model at differing types of institutions suggests that this frame may reveal more about how administrators perceive and experience mission than about the actual dictates of mission itself. In both cases, mission was treated as immovable and unarguable, a barrier to be managed rather than a resource for reflection. This convergence across ideological contexts indicates that the obstacle framing may reflect administrators' own frustrations, uncertainties, or sense of constraint when navigating speech tensions, rather than the inherent demands of Catholic mission. When asked to describe how he understood the mission, Marcus, the same SSAO who articulated that mission was out of step with the political moment, said, "Well it's not like I have it memorized." This highlights the extent to which mission is not simply a static set of rules, but something that is actively interpreted, enacted, and at times, resisted within institutional life.

6.2 Mission as Tool

This model emphasizes how people use mission as a functional resource to advance particular goals, rather than as a transformative force that fundamentally shapes individuals or institutional culture. On its positive side, the Mission as Tool model highlights that mission can be a usable, practical

resource and something that helps administrators connect their work to the values and purposes of Catholic higher education. Mission can and should support the work of fostering dialogue, facilitating ethical reasoning, and creating the conditions for healthy speech and expression. When mobilized by values-driven leaders, mission provides a meaningful framework for promoting justice, restorative practices, and civic engagement. Meg, an SSAO, compared the mission to the engine that drove her institution's work. "It's the heartbeat of this institution. It's the galvanizing point for folks regardless of their demographic identities related to religion."

But in the same way that a hammer can be used to build a house or harm a person, a tool's use is highly dependent on the motives of the wielder. Noel, a conduct officer, highlighted this nuance and said, "We can wield the mission in ways that are helpful. But then I think we can also wield the mission in ways to make it fit what we need in the moment." When mission is treated simply as a tool, it becomes something that can be bent to fit individual agendas or institutional priorities as needed. Hollis, another conduct officer, observed a similar pattern especially around speech and expression. She said, "I think that when conflict is arising around free speech and special activity, people are quoting our mission and using it in support of their arguments…their own individual stances."

In this frame, it can be difficult to discern what mission actually calls for, apart from how it is selectively framed by those invoking it. Sam, a former SSAO, shared a similar concern and said, "I've seen it used to justify opposite decisions in the same semester." Mission can be picked up or set aside much like any other tool, something to employ when convenient rather than a force that asks anything enduring or transformative of those who use it. Mission as Tool model often focuses on what mission can accomplish and the goals it can achieve rather than the relationships it calls participants to. At worst, the mission can be used against someone else. "We want to make sure that we're using mission in an appropriate way and not allowing folks to weaponize the term mission right to shut down the expression of individuals," said Jamie, an SSAO. The language of the weaponization of the mission was heard from several participants across the study.

6.3 Mission as Container

Here, mission is understood not as a directive or tool, but as the encompassing environment in which a Catholic institution exists. Mission is ambient, surrounding, forming, and shaping everything. Rather than offering specific instructions for every action, its shared values provide guardrails beyond which the institution should not extend. Yet within those boundaries there is space for interpretation, growth, and variation. This model reveals the quiet power of mission as a formative and containing force, capable of resisting co-optation by individuals while also establishing the moral perimeter of institutional life.

The strength of Mission as Container lies in its ability to transcend personal agendas and instead root into enduring values. As Reese, a mission officer, explained,

> Our mission statement begins… 'a community that welcomes people of all beliefs'… it's not 'despite that we're [charism] and Catholic'… it's not like, 'don't worry, everybody's welcome.' That's how the cornerstone was laid. This is what we return to when we need to understand who we are and where to go.

Unlike the models of Tool or Obstacle, Mission as Container cannot be easily simplified into a single political stance or policy measure. The thrust of this model is typically toward the sort of formation and dialogue that Catholic higher education claims prides itself on instilling in students, faculty, and staff.

However, because mission in this model is highly ambient, it can also be difficult to pin into practical action, especially in moments of conflict or controversy or crisis. As Ellis, a mission officer, noted, "Mission is mentioned in every document, but nobody agrees on what it actually means for policy." Lennon, a conduct officer, described this dynamic in developing speech policy. He said,

> The provost's office and general counsel created our inaugural speech and expression policy. There's a huge section in there about our [charism], and how our [charism] promotes free expression, and that, you know, the exchange of differing viewpoints is what enriches us. But it's really it's kinda ambiguous. It doesn't go into a ton of detail about how we would navigate certain things that seem to pop up on campus. So a pop-up protest or a demonstration, like, it doesn't really cover those types of things.

Similarly, Cary, an SSAO, reflected, "We invoke it constantly, but when something really contentious happens, everyone suddenly backs away from it."

The very ambient quality that gives Mission as Container its formative power can also make it harder to draw clear lines about what standard and acceptable policies are more aligned or less aligned with mission. Within the broad space that mission defines, administrators often find themselves operating in gray areas where interpretations of mission can vary significantly. It is possible, and in fact common, for two individuals to invoke mission in the same conversation yet mean very different things, shaped by their own experiences, roles, or priorities. This ambiguity allows for flexibility and inclusivity, but it can also create uncertainty and tension, especially in moments when those differing understandings come into conflict.

Once something moves beyond the boundaries of the container, the fact that a policy or action is *not* missional tends to be widely recognized. But what happens next is far less certain. Crossing that line raises difficult questions for the work of Catholic higher education. What does it mean to be "outside" the mission? What are the consequences for speech, action, or institutional identity when something or someone is determined to fall beyond the moral perimeter? Finn, a mission officer, reflected on the

limits of free expression in a way that evoked the model of mission as container and also highlighted its challenges.

> The question, of course, becomes, when does free expression cross some sort of line to be harmful? Maybe the first line would be, legally questionable or creating legal exposure in some way or another. And that's probably the baseline. But then the other question, the harder question is, when does it cross the line to violate our focus on the dignity of the human person. What do we do about that, and how do we balance that with our legal responsibilities? It would be great if there's an answer to that. I have colleagues, including on those senior teams that I think want answers and strict protocols and rules about how we make these decisions. And of course, I would like that, too. And yet those are really hard to establish because the cases each tend to be so nuanced and have so many particularities that it's hard to come up with a one-size-fits-all approach.

Does exclusion from the mission's boundaries point to a need for prohibition, correction, or simply more dialogue? The Mission as Container model provides a moral and cultural framework, but offers little prescriptive guidance about how to respond when the boundaries are tested or breached. As a result, administrators are often left to navigate these moments in real time, without clear protocols, relying instead on discernment, precedent, and institutional culture. Practitioners who rely solely on Mission as Container may be flummoxed when they encounter a student whose needs fall squarely outside of what's defined as mission.

The models outlined above illustrate the varied and often contradictory ways that Catholic mission is invoked, interpreted, and operationalized in moments of speech-related tension. Together, they show that mission is neither a static doctrine nor a simple solution, but a dynamic force and font that administrators engage in diverse ways to navigate the complexities of campus expression. These models are not offered as prescriptive categories or rigid typologies. Rather, they serve as reflective tools to help campus leaders better understand their own practices and assumptions. Each model carries both benefits and challenges, and in practice, administrators or institutions may draw on multiple models even within a single situation involving speech and expression.[12] Recognizing these patterns can foster self-awareness and support more coherent, intentional efforts to align speech

[12] Building on the three descriptive models presented in this study—Mission as Obstacle, Mission as Tool, and Mission as Container—Susan Haarman is currently developing a fourth, aspirational model: Mission as River. This emerging framework seeks to move beyond the reactive and instrumental tendencies observed in the data by offering a more theologically rooted and spiritually formative vision of Catholic university mission. Mission as River draws on the Catholic understanding of tradition as a living and participatory inheritance (Congar, 1964; Dulles, 1987), one that is not static but continuously unfolding. In this model, mission is something into which faculty, staff, and students are invited to wade and be shaped, not merely something they wield or work around. Like a river, it is constant in its identity but dynamic in its flow, capable of carving new pathways, reshaping the landscape, and revealing new truths over time. Mission as River emphasizes our participation in something larger than ourselves, calling the university community into ongoing formation, communal discernment, and a humble attentiveness to the evolving needs of the world and Church. It also addresses the limitations observed in the other three models: it resists the rigidity of Obstacle, the opportunism of Tool, and the ambient nature of Container by offering a vision of mission that is both grounded, grand, and generative. Mission can invite authentic institutional transformation while honoring tradition.

governance with the deeper values and distinctive mission of Catholic higher education.[13] As we turn to the conclusion, we consider how these insights might inform more coherent and intentional practices that honor both the distinctiveness of Catholic institutions and their responsibility to foster open, ethical, and just campus dialogue.

[13] The authors also created a brief reflective tool Mission and Speech: Institutional Models Self-Assessment Quiz. It is attached as an appendix.

7. Bridging the Gap between Theological Ideas and Lived Realities of Campus Discourse

The findings of this study reveal the complex and often contested ways that Catholic colleges and universities navigate the intersection of speech, mission, and institutional identity. Our interviews surfaced that speech practices at these institutions are deeply contextualized. Each school's approach was shaped by geographic location, institutional charism, the strength of connection to mission, experience of leadership, and varying levels of concern about reputation and enrollment. As a result, there is no single "best practice" that could be universally applied without flattening the unique challenges and opportunities present in each setting.

What Catholic higher education can share, however, is a common grounding for thoughtful engagement with these tensions. It is helpful to return again to the vision of a Catholic university laid out by *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* which affirms that Catholic universities should contribute to the Church's mission while engaging the broader world with courage, dialogue, and a commitment to justice. The document serves as a helpful framing device for the increasingly complex conversation around speech and expression on Catholic campuses, not because it offers easy answers or uniform directives, but because it articulates a foundational vision that all Catholic higher education can claim as a point of reference. By inviting institutions to integrate faith, reason, moral formation, and service to the common good, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* provides a shared lens through which universities can thoughtfully develop approaches that reflect their unique contexts, charisms, and challenges. We do not present *Ex Corde* as a clear solution or a set of rigid prescriptions, nor do we suggest it is without flaws or complications. Indeed, its conditional framing of academic freedom and mission leaves room for interpretation that can itself generate tension and falsely conflates hierarchical structures of governance with effective education and generativity (Faggioli, 2024; Russo & Gregory, 2001).

Regardless, at its core, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* presents a model of the Catholic university that integrates intellectual freedom, moral formation, and service to the common good. It calls institutions to pursue truth with courage and integrity, to foster communities of dialogue and inclusion, and to form students in ways that unite faith and reason. Asa, a former mission officer, said that she appreciated *Ex Corde*'s vision of the university as an essential and unique place for the creation of culture and the formation of young adults. She said,

> College is often the time when undergraduate young people are entering that conversation [public discourse]. They are trying to hone their own beliefs, their own understanding. I think the hope is that the [Catholic university] provides a framework that is holistic. So we're not doing hate speech. We're starting with basic respect and dignity. We're starting with curiosity and informed consent. My image is they're in a civil discourse [at a Catholic university] right? It's not people lobbing grenades just to harm or insult others.

Yet, as our findings suggest, this vision is often unevenly applied, and at times invoked to justify restrictions that risk undermining its very goals. By rooting our recommendations in *Ex Corde*, we seek to recover its generative potential and highlight how Catholic universities can navigate speech tensions in ways that are both mission-aligned and responsive to the demands of a pluralistic, democratic society.

7.1 Train Campus Professionals to Engage Speech through Both Legal and Moral Lenses

While *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is sometimes invoked to justify speech restrictions, its broader vision offers a more generative approach. It calls Catholic universities to "speak uncomfortable truths" (ʃ32), to foster rigorous inquiry, and to promote intellectual and moral formation through pluralistic engagement. Fully realized, this vision does not pit speech against mission, but rather integrates them in service of truth, justice, and the common good. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* affirms the value of academic freedom, but places it within a distinctive theological and moral framework. The document states that a Catholic university

> possesses the autonomy necessary to develop its distinctive identity and pursue its proper mission and…freedom in research and teaching is recognized and respected according to the principles and methods of each individual discipline, so long as the rights of the individual and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good (John Paul II, 1990, Art. 2 §5).

On its face, this appears to affirm the core values of intellectual freedom and disciplinary integrity. However, the key qualifying phrase "within the confines of the truth and the common good" introduces theological ambiguity and institutional discretion that may conflict with academic norms. Harper, a mission officer, when asked to speak about the mission echoes this when he said, "Free speech. Yes. Academic freedom. Of course. But, it needs to be serving the mission."

In practice, it allows university leaders or ecclesial authorities to police speech in ways that may appear to prioritize orthodoxy over inquiry. This clause is rarely accompanied by definitions or guidelines, leaving its interpretation highly variable from school to school. For faculty and students alike, this lack of clarity may cause preemptive self-censorship or anxiety around engaging controversial topics, especially those related to sexuality, gender, politics, or critique of the Church itself. Thus, even while the document upholds academic freedom and does not ask for censorship, the very initial response of the faculty, staff, and students on the ground, especially in this anxious moment for higher education, may be to avoid having the conversation at all.

In this context, student affairs professionals and mission officers play a crucial role in bridging the gap between theological ideals and the lived realities of campus discourse. They can model and facilitate practices that honor both the mission of Catholic higher education and the principles of intellectual freedom. This begins with intentional training that helps faculty and staff first understand the unique context of Catholic higher education and then engage speech and expression through both a legal and moral, formative lens. Finn, a mission officer, uses the framework of inviting university community members to understand, appreciate, and participate in the mission as a scaffolded model of onboarding and formation.

> The first phase, if you will, is (to) understand, to just recognize that the University has a mission that informs things. The second level is to appreciate. Hopefully everybody who works here or comes to study here will appreciate some aspect or multiple aspects, or any aspect of that mission. And then the third level, the sort of the deepest level would be to participate. To see how (in) your role, whether you work in dining or in human resources, or in the classroom as a faculty member, you are charged with embodying and carrying forward some aspect of that mission.

Formation work around the mission must be done at all levels of Catholic universities and must include students, staff, and faculty. Framing the mission for administrators working with speech and expression as something that is generative and not an impediment. Drew, a conduct officer, emphasized the importance of taking a discernment-based framework, saying, "Mission doesn't say you can't do this. Mission says, 'how do I look at it in that lens? And how do I treat people with respect, even though I don't agree with them?'"

The articulation of the mission as generative helps staff engage speech issues through both legal *and* moral lenses and equips them to navigate the ambiguity around speech that can arise at Catholic schools with confidence rather than fear. As mentioned above, many participants who worked at state institutions before coming to a Catholic university expressed that managing speech and expression was often technically easier there. Meg, an SSAO, said, "At a public institution you're not allowed to go anywhere near content. You contract. Neutral neutrality is a foundational principle." Bryce, an SSAO, expressed that there were clearer lines around expression.

> You knew what you had to do. But I don't know. This is probably another reason I'm working in Catholic higher education now, just because you have to do something or can do something doesn't necessarily mean that's the best for the community's development.

When institutions approach speech tensions from a place of fear where risk management or reputational concerns dominate, speech repression is often perceived as the *first response* rather than as the outcome of careful dialogue and discernment. This perception undermines trust and stifles the formative potential of speech and expression conflicts. Alex, a mission officer who also served as a conduct officer earlier in her career, highlighted the dangerous effect of fear in administration. She

said, "I believe that leadership that is fear based is always gonna harm the people that the leaders are supposed to be serving."

To counter this danger, student affairs leaders can create structured opportunities for students to engage in dialogue around contested topics, encouraging reflection, discernment, and empathy rather than avoidance or polarization. They can work proactively with mission officers, faculty, and legal counsel to develop consistent, transparent processes for managing speech-related tensions, ensuring that decisions are both mission-aligned and responsive to the complexities of pluralistic campus life. By fostering environments where students can wrestle with complexity in good faith, student affairs professionals can help Catholic universities move closer to *Ex Corde's* vision of institutions that "speak uncomfortable truths" while forming students in both conscience and courage.

7.2 Foster a Culture of Meaningful Commitment to Pluralism and Formative Dialogue

One of the foundational commitments of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is the integral formation of students in both intellect and faith. It describes how Catholic education should "enable students to acquire an organic vision of reality and to develop a continuing desire for intellectual progress" (John Paul II, 1990, ¶20). Students are called to pursue "excellence in humanistic and cultural development with specialized professional training," and to cultivate "personal judgment" alongside "a religious, moral, and social sense" (¶23). These goals affirm a model of education rooted in critical thinking, ethical formation, and social responsibility. Yet when institutional mission is invoked to shield campuses from difficult conversations, these aspirations risk being undercut.

Overly restrictive interpretations of appropriate discourse (e.g. disallowing faculty-led panels on reproductive health, canceling invited speakers who offer critical views on Church teachings, or suppressing student journalism that challenges institutional policies) can substitute indoctrination for education. In such cases, students are denied the very formation *Ex Corde* calls for—one in which their moral, spiritual, and intellectual faculties are shaped through rigorous engagement with the world as it is, not merely as the institution imagines it should be. A university committed to formation must trust students to grapple with complexity rather than insulating them from it.

This commitment to formation is inseparable from *Ex Corde's* parallel vision of Catholic universities as pluralistic communities, where intellectual freedom and respect for conscience are essential to authentic moral and intellectual development. Despite its emphasis on Catholic identity, *Ex Corde* articulates a vision of Catholic universities as pluralistic communities marked by openness and dialogue. The document recognizes that "the university community of many Catholic institutions includes members of other Churches, ecclesial communities and religions, and also those who profess no religious belief" (John Paul II, 1990, ¶26). It insists that "the freedom of conscience of

each person is to be fully respected" (Art. 2 §4). These commitments suggest a framework in which theological fidelity and intellectual pluralism are not mutually exclusive but mutually enriching. However, coexisting these values is not always easy to navigate. In practice, faculty and students who hold dissenting views—especially around gender, reproductive justice, or institutional racism—may find their voices marginalized or dismissed under the pretext of safeguarding Catholic values. Meanwhile, institutional policies may create asymmetrical expectations: requiring non-Catholic faculty to respect Church teaching while not always reciprocating in respect for their intellectual or cultural contributions. This creates an uneven playing field in which dialogue is encouraged, but not always practiced with equal weight or power. To fulfill *Ex Corde's* vision, Catholic universities must move beyond formal statements of inclusion and cultivate a deeper, lived intellectual hospitality (e.g. through facilitated dialogues on controversial topics, support for student publications that reflect diverse views, and transparent policies that protect dissenting expression) that invites critical engagement across religious, political, and ideological difference.

7.3 Beyond 'Free' - Setting A Higher Standard For Speech at Catholic Universities

One of the most compelling, and perhaps underutilized, passages in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is its call for Catholic universities to act as truth-tellers in society. The document states unequivocally that "a Catholic University must have the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society," (John Paul II, 1990, ¶32). This prophetic mandate positions Catholic institutions not as bastions of safe consensus, but as bold contributors to the moral and intellectual life of the world and communities called to courageously engage with complexity, not retreat from it.

A simple free speech framework, one that prioritizes the protection of expression absent an understanding of impact and intention above all else, is insufficient for the truth telling tasked to Catholic colleges and universities. Catholic higher education is not merely tasked with safeguarding expression for its own sake, but to cultivate speech as a vehicle for moral formation, discernment, and service to the common good. When asked if working at a Catholic school necessitated a different approach to speech and expression than at a public university, several participants expressed that the difference was not in what was not allowed to be said, but rather in going beyond the minimum standard of dialogue set by free speech. Bryce, an SSAO, and Taylor, a conduct officer, both argued that Catholic institutions should hold themselves to a higher bar for dialogue on campus. Rory, a mission officer, linked this to the back to the commitment of Catholic schools to pursue truth. He said,

> I think that being in a Catholic university like ours, means we should go further, we should invite free expression as a cornerstone of the academic project of universities. But a call to civility, to respect, to understanding other perspectives rounds out the sort of coldness that you could say of, like everybody could say whatever they want full stop. No, I think [Catholic higher education] ought to go further. To asking what we owe each other. Especially within a university community the success of which is predicated on the notion that we're all going to pursue truth together. And it may be messy.

A truly generative framework for Catholic higher education must be interpreted through a lens of courageous engagement and thoughtful formation, rather than simple defensive gatekeeping. Devin, an SSAO, said that one of the great benefits of being at a Catholic university was getting to proactively shape the environment on campus around and through speech and expression. She said,

> We decide where we're going to draw the line in the sand around speech. So it's not just saying anything to be able to say anything. We should *all* be thinking about responsible speech and how, in a Catholic context, we're contributing to the creation of knowledge and to the dignity of others in our words. How we're promoting the common good, like all of those things, should be at the core of how we think about our speech.

Overwhelmingly, participants claimed that a simple standard of free speech was not appropriate to Catholic universities. Most claimed that what was lost in the absence of raw freedom to say anything, was more than made up for in potential for more responsible and relational dialogue. As Erin, a conduct officer, concisely said, "So many people focus on the restrictions that come from mission. But we do not often think that sometimes it is also repressing the speech that should be repressed because it aims to seriously harm people. It feels really good to be able to say no to white supremacists and neo-nazis."

8. Conclusion

While this study is situated within the context of Catholic higher education, several of its insights may be relevant to colleges and universities more broadly. Though the tensions explored here between institutional mission, academic freedom, and inclusive campus culture take on specific theological and ecclesial dimensions in Catholic settings, they are not unique to them. Many non-religious institutions, both private and public, articulate guiding missions or institutional values that shape their educational priorities, community norms, and public identities. Public universities may emphasize civic responsibility, democratic engagement, or regional service; liberal arts colleges may promote holistic education or transformative learning; and private institutions may define themselves through commitments to access, innovation, or social justice. These missions, while not religious in nature, similarly interact with campus discourse, sometimes generating friction when expression is perceived to conflict with institutional ethos. In this light, the broader approach of this study, foregrounding how institutional identity and moral commitments shape the governance of speech, offers a framework that could support reflective practice in other higher education settings. Rather than viewing campus speech controversies solely through a legal or policy lens, institutions might benefit from examining how their own histories, missions, and values inform the discourse they hope to foster. The frameworks and reflective tools developed through this project, including the self-assessment prompt structure, could be adapted to help a variety of colleges and universities assess the coherence and clarity of their approaches to speech and expression.

A Catholic university's commitment to moral and intellectual formation invites students into conversations that foster empathy, critical thinking, and justice and not simply the unregulated airing of views. As a result, student affairs professionals and mission officers at Catholic universities must continually grapple with the deeper question of *what kind of conversation are we called to promote on our campus?* This work requires ongoing reflection not simply on *what* is spoken, but on *how* we speak and engage with one another and *who* feels comfortable speaking. This means creating conditions where dialogue is marked by respect, relational responsibility, and a shared pursuit of truth. For campus leaders, this is challenging, unfinished work requiring the navigation of tensions between openness and mission, pluralism and tradition, freedom and formation. Yet it is precisely in this grappling that Catholic higher education lives out its distinctive identity.

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10. Appendix

10.1 Mission and Speech: Institutional Self-Assessment Quiz

1. When addressing controversial speech on campus, our institution's mission is most often experienced as...
   - **a.** A fixed constraint that complicates decisions and forces workarounds
   - **b.** A resource we intentionally use—sometimes to promote dialogue, sometimes to justify or defend opposing decisions
   - **c.** A shared moral environment that shapes our approach up to a point—but can feel ambiguous or stop short when things get especially complex

2. In moments of speech-related tension, our institution's first response is typically to...
   - **a.** Focus on managing perceived risks tied to mission conflicts, often through cautious or indirect strategies
   - **b.** Invoke mission to support the action we want to take—whether that's opening dialogue or drawing limits
   - **c.** Look to our charism or values as a framework for engagement—but sometimes find those values don't give clear direction in tough cases

3. How often do you or colleagues need to 'work around' mission when navigating speech issues?
   - **a.** Frequently—we feel constrained and have to find creative ways to reconcile mission with practical realities
   - **b.** Not often—we find ways to *use* mission to support or justify our decisions, for better or worse
   - **c.** Occasionally—mission offers guidance at first, but in harder situations it can feel like we're on our own beyond certain boundaries

4. When controversial speech arises, mission is typically invoked to...
   - **a.** Highlight tensions or limits we need to carefully navigate
   - **b.** Provide justification for the chosen course of action, even if the logic varies across cases
   - **c.** Set a tone for engagement—though its boundaries sometimes leave us unsure what to do next

5. In practice, does mission feel like…
   - **a.** A static boundary we must maneuver around
   - **b.** A flexible tool that can be applied to support different goals or justify decisions
   - **c.** A pervasive moral atmosphere that helps orient us—but that can become vague or insufficient beyond a certain point

6. How do decisions about controversial speakers or events usually get justified at your institution?
   - **a.** By referencing mission as a limit we must work within or around
   - **b.** By actively invoking mission to defend or promote the decision
   - **c.** By appealing to shared values that shape our initial thinking, even if they don't always give a clear answer

7. When mission is invoked in speech-related matters, it tends to…
   - **a.** Add friction or complexity to the work
   - **b.** Be applied deliberately to advance or defend a particular position
   - **c.** Set the stage for engagement—though sometimes we hit the edge of what it can address

8. How does your institution generally approach ambiguity or tension in speech cases?
   - **a.** It tries to reduce ambiguity by finding workarounds to avoid mission conflict
   - **b.** It applies mission as a tool to resolve ambiguity, for better or worse
   - **c.** It embraces ambiguity at first, but the mission framework can run out of guidance in especially tough cases

9. When mission appears in policy or decision-making, it is usually…
   - **a.** A complicating factor that constrains choices
   - **b.** A resource invoked to justify or frame decisions, sometimes inconsistently
   - **c.** A background moral compass that helps initially—but its limits become apparent at the edges of controversy

10. How do most staff experience mission in speech-related issues?
    a. As a source of constraint requiring careful navigation
    b. As something people actively use to support decisions
    c. As a shared context that orients work—up to the point where mission's limits leave gaps

11. When facing controversial expression, your institution's mission is most likely to...
    a. Feel like a barrier staff need to work around
    b. Be invoked strategically to back up the chosen response
    c. Shape the early conversation, but eventually reveal its boundaries in tough cases

12. What best describes how your institution uses mission in speech matters?
    a. Mission often feels like an inflexible piece we have to fit into decisions
    b. Mission functions as a flexible tool—sometimes promoting dialogue, sometimes used to justify conflicting decisions
    c. Mission provides a moral environment that guides us broadly, but not always clearly once issues go beyond its familiar boundaries

Tally up your responses. If you answered primarily 'a' , your approach most commonly aligns with Mission as Obstacle. If you answered primarily 'b' , your approach most commonly aligns with Mission as Tool. If you answered primarily 'a' , your approach most commonly aligns with Mission as Container.