2025 ANNUAL REPORT



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement

Message from the Center's Leadership

Every year since the establishment of the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement in 2017, there has been an increased need for the vital educational workshops, programming and research we provide. In 2025, that demand grew exponentially.

Higher education and other critical democratic institutions face the gravest threats they have seen in over 70 years. Defending and securing the First Amendment and academic freedom — two cornerstones of colleges and universities — necessitates understanding these principles and their roles on campus. This is the core of the Center's work: ensuring that stakeholders can articulate why these values are critical and how to further them through scholarly exploration, community engagement and expression of diverse perspectives.

During this challenging year, the Center continued its critical support of both the University of California and professionals across the country with resources including crucial training for all incoming UC students; workshops on navigating complex legal and climate dynamics; an annual conference; and a monthly podcast offering insightful analysis and ideas for impact.



Erwin Chemerinsky
Dean
University of California, Berkeley
School of Law



Howard Gillman
Chancellor
University of California, Irvine



Michelle Deutchman
Executive Director
University of California
National Center for Free Speech
and Civic Engagement

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Mission

To explore the intersection of expression, engagement and democratic learning and consider what can be done to restore trust in the value of free speech on college campuses and within society at large.

2025 By the Numbers



2,000+

attendees at Center workshops



4,100+

SpeechMatters podcast listens



494

attendees at annual #SpeechMatters Conference



15

Valuing Open and Inclusive Conversation and Engagement (VOICE) Award Recipients



9

Fellows' Research Projects Completed

Center Fellows

Class of 2024–2025

With its diversity of interests and expertise, our seventh class of fellows added to the Center's rich body of work, focusing on equipping students, staff, faculty and others in the higher education space with tools and resources to strengthen our communities.



Cameron Beatty

"It's Still There, But It's Not the Same": Understanding the Impact of Anti-DEI and Anti-CRT Legislation on Campus Civic Engagement for Black Student Leaders Navigating Expression



Derron Bennett

From Capitol to Campus: A Practitioner's Toolkit for Protecting Academic Freedom in the Face of State and Federal Challenges



Robert Cohen — Senior Fellow

The Free Speech Movement @60: Reflections on Campus Free Speech 1964/2024



Tara Donnelly

Supporting Student Information Literacy in an Era of Library Censorship



Susan Haarman & Leslie Watland

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



Tara Hudson & Alyssa Rockenbach

The Promise and Perils of Interpartisan Friendships for Fostering Democratic Learning and Reducing Values-Based Polarization on Campus



Anil Kalhan

Privacy, Surveillance, and Academic Freedom



Penelope Lusk

(No) Shame in Speaking: Resources for Navigating Emotions on Campus

"The Center team has cultivated an irreplaceable environment of inspiration and collaboration, which I am truly grateful for, especially amid the political challenges of this past year. Through the fellowship, I had the opportunity to share my insights during the UCLA Democracy Workshops series and engage with civic educators and practitioners working directly on the ground. The thought-provoking conversations I shared with the 2024–25 fellows and Center staff strengthened my resolve to carry this work forward."

— Yi Ding, Faculty and Director of Affordable Learning, California State University, Northridge



Yi Ding

Bridging Gaps: AI Civic Literacy Against Political Misinformation

Fellows Lead the Conversation

The Center's growing cohort of fellows are at the forefront of national conversations on higher education, free expression and civic engagement. By sharing their research and insights in public settings, they bring their scholarship to life — helping more people to connect with and build on their work. Here are just a few highlights from the past year:



Center fellows took part in the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) annual meeting, where four former fellows – Susan Balter-Reitz, Jill Dunlap, Alex Kappus and Ryan Miller – joined a panel moderated by executive director Michelle Deutchman. The session, "Investigating Democracy: Furthering the National Conversation on Expression and Democratic Participation," featured insights from their emerging research on the intersections of free expression and civic engagement.

Former senior fellow Elizabeth Neiahus also moderated a separate session with participants from a previous Center event, the institute on "Advancing the Mission of Higher Education in a Polarized Environment."





Robert Cohen, 2024–25 senior fellow, is a leading historian of the Free Speech Movement. As part of his fellowship, he collaborated with movement veteran and UC professor Bettina Apthekar to engage teachers nationwide in conversations about how to educate K–12 and college students on the events at UC Berkeley in the 1960s, and why they remain relevant to today's discussions on free speech and activism.

Center fellows from multiple cohorts came together for a panel on "Mobilizing for Higher Ed: Collective Action in the Face of Political Attacks on Academic Freedom" at the 2025 Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) conference. The session examined escalating political threats to academic freedom and institutional autonomy, with fellows Nina Flores, Kaleb Briscoe, Elizabeth Niehaus, Jacqueline Pedota and Raquel Rall offering insights from their research. In addition, fellow Ryan Miller was honored with the ASHE Mid-Career Award, highlighting the ongoing contributions of Center alumni to national conversations on higher education policy and practice.



VOICE Initiative

2024–2025 Cohort

The **Valuing Open and Inclusive Conversation and Engagement (VOICE) Initiative** provides funding for UC students, staff and faculty to conduct research or coordinate programs and activities that further the mission of the Center. Since its inception, VOICE has funded almost 100 projects across all 10 UC campuses. The 2024–2025 cohort engaged in work that touched approximately 2,300 UC community members.



Civic Engagement Scholars Program
UC Santa Barbara

Davis Journal of Legal Studies, Volume V
UC Davis



Democracy Workshops: Promoting Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement in Advance of the November 2024 General Election
UC LA



Diaspora Magazine
UC Berkley

Eras Tour: Student-Led Free Speech Movements Gallery
UC Irvine



Our Voice, Our Vote: Building an Informed Latina Electorate
UC San Diego



SASICon 2024: Speeches for Liberation
UC Irvine



The Belonging Lab: Finessing Team Dialogue
UC Berkley



Tracking the Impact of Pink Slime News in California
UC Berkley



(Re)Writing Migration Stories Across the UC
UC Irvine



UC Berkeley Votechella
UC Berkley



Union Town Hall: Voting, Information and Community
UCLA



Vision Fellowship
UC Santa Barbara



3rd Decolonial Praxis Conference
UC Riverside



60 Years of Free Speech: A Panel with Icons of Berkeley Activism
UC Berkley

VOICE Project Spotlight: Votechella

Since 2018, UC Berkeley's student government (ASUC), in partnership with various groups from across campus, hosted the free music festival Votechella during national election years. The event enabled UC Berkeley to achieve the highest overall student voter registration numbers across the UC system and was recognized as a 2024 ALL IN Most Engaged Campus for College Student Voting





Photos by Robert Durrell



"The support from the VOICE award has been indispensable to the success of Votechella and our general voter education efforts for several years. Votechella would not have reached its current scale without the generous funding and partnership of the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, whose support directly enabled UC Berkeley to become the #1 college campus in California for total student voter registration during the 2024 election."

— Saanvi Arora, Undergraduate External Affairs Vice President, UC Berkeley

VOICE In-Person Meeting

The Center hosted a VOICE In-Person Summit at UCLA with members of the 2024–2025 VOICE cohort. Attendees spent the day engaging in meaningful conversations about managing uncertainty, navigating institutional resistance, the impact of social media and fostering effective dialogue. 2024–25 UC Student Regent Josiah Beharry and Regent-Designate Sonya Brooks joined for an armchair conversation and VOICE recipient and UC Berkeley Haas School of Business Director of Inclusion & Belonging Katrina Koski closed the day out with a collaborative workshop.



#SpeechMatters 2025 Conference

Truth, Trust and Transformation

Our seventh annual conference was held virtually on Thursday, April 10, 2025. "Truth, Trust and Transformation" featured leaders from across higher education grappling with the role of colleges and universities in our democracy. Since the event, the conference has been viewed hundreds of times, demonstrating its broad reach and impact.

The conference brought together

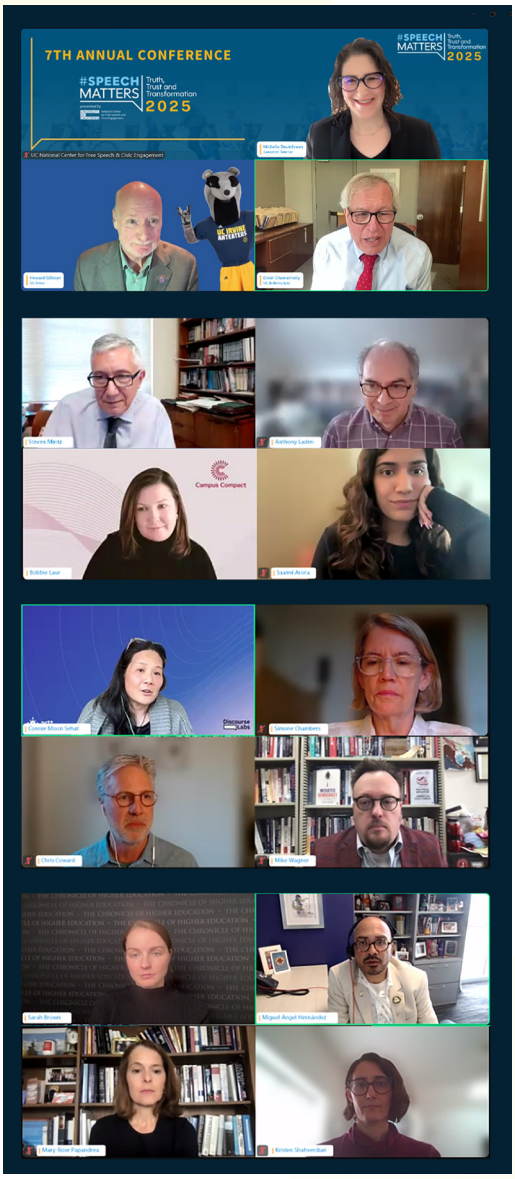
494 Live Attendees

141 Colleges and Universities

37 Civil-society Organizations

4 Sessions

16 Thought Leaders



SpeechMatters Podcast

The Center's monthly SpeechMatters podcast, hosted by Executive Director Michelle Deutchman, features thought leaders tackling the most pressing issues impacting free expression and democracy on campus and beyond. This season featured the following conversations:

SPEECH MATTERS PODCAST
presented by UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement

10,000+ LISTENS!



JANUARY

Jonathan Fansmith *– Senior Vice President of Government Relations & National Engagement, American Council on Education*



FEBRUARY

John Perrino *– Senior Policy and Advocacy Expert, Internet Society*



MARCH

Josiah Beharry *– 2024–25 UC Student Regent, UC Merced Ph.D. candidate in Interdisciplinary Humanities*
Sonya Brooks *– 2025–26 UC Student Regent UCLA Ph.D. candidate in Education*



APRIL

Jeremy Young *– Senior Advisor for Strategic Initiatives at American Association of Colleges and Universities*



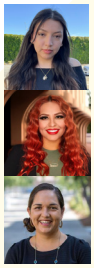
MAY

Jean-Claude Brizard *– President & CEO, Digital Promise*



JUNE

Katya Armistead *– Associate Vice Chancellor, Student Life & Belonging UC Santa Barbara*
Viviana Marsano *– Assistant Dean, Civic and Community Engagement, UC Santa Barbara*



JULY

Breana Figueroa Perez *– Undergraduate Student, UC Irvine*
Giovanna Itzel *– Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science, UC Irvine*
Laura E. Enriquez *– Associate Professor, Chicano/Latino Studies, UC Irvine*



AUGUST

Jon Shields *– Professor of Government, Claremont McKenna College*



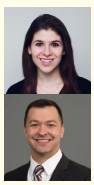
SEPTEMBER

Colleen Shogan *– 11th Archivist of the United States, National Archives and Records Administration*



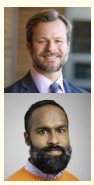
OCTOBER

Timothy Zick *– John Marshall Professor of Government and Citizenship, William & Mary Law School*



NOVEMBER

Caroline Mehl *– Co-Founder & Executive Director, Constructive Dialogue Institute*
Alex Kappus *– Senior Director, Client Success, Carnegie*



DECEMBER

Brian Soucek *– Martin Luther King Jr. Professor of Law, UC Davis*
Emerson Sykes *– Senior Staff Attorney, American Civil Liberties Union*

Educating the UC Community

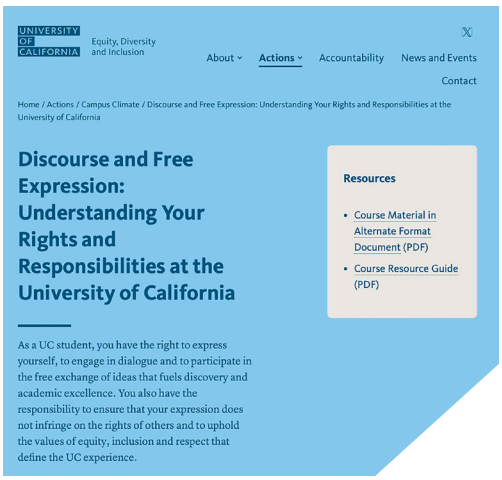
Systemwide Academic Freedom Congress

The Center, together with the UC Provost's Office and the UC Academic Senate's Committee on Academic Freedom, convened the Systemwide Academic Freedom Congress in June, a virtual summit exploring the origins, enduring significanc and contemporary challenges of academic freedom. The event brought together UC leaders, faculty and staff for a day of discussions and reflections on this fundamental principle of higher education and featured a keynote address from Danielle Allen, Director of the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation and the Democratic Knowledge Project at Harvard University.



SB 1287 Discourse and Free Expression Training

In 2024 the California State Government passed SB 1287, the "Equity in Higher Education Act," that required, among other items, postsecondary students to receive training on what constitutes a hostile environment, procedures for investigation of student code of conduct violations, policies around protest on campus and how to have dialogue with mutual respect and civility. As part of this effort, the Center worked with Graduate, Undergraduate and Equity Affairs, UC Legal and the UCLA Dialogue Across Difference Initiative to create an online training on "Discourse and Free Expression: Understanding Your Rights and Responsibilities at the University of California."



UC Irvine First Year Experience Course

The Center worked alongside the Office of the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning at UC Irvine to develop curriculum for an online module titled "Living and Learning in Community and the Importance of Free Expression on Campus," a required component of the First Year Experience program. The module aims to help students develop an understanding of the diverse college environment and critically assess free expression, academic freedom, and the impact each has on campus climate.





UC Santa Barbara Civic Engagement Scholars Program Presentation

In October, Center Communications and Program Associate and Gaucho alumna Melanie Ziment traveled to UC Santa Barbara to speak with students in the Civic Engagement Scholars Program. The program, spearheaded by educators Katya Armistead and Viviana Marsano, teaches students the ideals of active citizenship, through a quarter of coursework and project-based learning. Melanie spoke with students about how the fundamentals of the First Amendment play out on university campuses.

Educating the National Higher Ed Community

Ranging from keynote addresses to online webinars, the Center hosts a variety of events and programs throughout the year with its expert staff and fellows. These events provide valuable opportunities to share and develop our work and engage with campus communities around the country. All of the Center's educational programming is open to the public generally at no cost.

Fellows in the Field

At the conclusion of each annual Fellows Program, the Center proudly hosts a series of digital workshops, highlighting the Fellows' research and findings through interactive sessions. This year's conversations drew over 150 attendees and included:



'Good Faith Speech': How Catholic Universities Invoke, Interpret and Apply their Mission in Moments of Tension

Susan Haarman, Associate Director of the Center for Engaged Learning, Teaching and Scholarship, Loyola University of Chicago

Leslie Watland, Associate Dean of Students, DePaul University



Beyond Red and Blue: Fostering Friendships in a Polarized Campus Climate

Tara Hudson, Associate Professor of Higher Education Administration, Kent State University

Alyssa Rockenbach, Alumni Distinguished Graduate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development, North Carolina State University



(No) Shame in Speaking: Creating Space for Courageous Conversation

Penelope Lusk, Ph.D. Candidate in the Education, Culture and Society Program, University of Pennsylvania

Dueling Perspectives: Is Institutional Neutrality Necessary for Academic Freedom?



In January, the Association of American University Professors (AAUP) issued a new statement on institutional neutrality. Tom Ginsburg, the faculty director of the Forum for Free Inquiry and Expression at the University of Chicago (birthplace of the Kalven Report) published a piece taking the AAUP to task. Brian Soucek, a law professor at UC Davis and a drafter of the new statement also published an op-ed – his in defense of the statement. What does each perspective suggest for academic freedom and whether universities should respond to current events? Almost 200 attendees joined this program live to hear from them both and learn more.

Ask the Experts: Importance of Student Press Freedoms

Being an active participant in civil discourse often requires asking tough questions and considering a variety of viewpoints. The Center is grateful to have access to academics and other thought leaders with expertise on expression and democratic learning who can help answer challenging queries. In this edition of Ask the Experts, the Center observed Student Press Freedom Day 2025. To mark the day, student journalists and their supporters across the country celebrate the contributions of student journalists and raise awareness of the need to support their independence without censorship. We asked four UC student newspaper Editors-in-Chief the following question: Through your position, what have you learned about the value of free expression, and how do you advocate for your right to report?



Collaborations

Over the past year, the Center presented and shared its expertise on the First Amendment, academic freedom and related current issues at or with the following organizations.

Organizations

American Civil Liberties Union

Association of American Colleges and Universities

Association of American Universities

Association for the Study of Higher Education

Campus Compact

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators

PEN America

Stetson Law

Stanford University

University of Pittsburgh

San Francisco State University

University of California system







In the News

Center leadership, fellows and VOICE recipients were vital resources for national media outlets.

Throughout 2025 these included *(partial list)*:

The Chronicle of Higher Education

Inside Higher Ed

The Washington Post

Times Higher Education

The Conversation

Academe Blog — A publication of the American Association of University Professors

University of Pittsburg University Times

American Libraries — A publication of the American Library Association

The State News



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