



April 30, 2025

Dear Members of the Brown Community,

Beginning in December 2024, the Ad Hoc Committee on University Values and Voice was [charged](#) to lead a process to define the core values of Brown University by engaging with Brown's students, faculty, staff and alumni. The Committee was also asked to develop a statement outlining how the University may use its voice publicly.

This *Statement of University Values and Voice*, accompanied by an explanatory *Report of the Ad-hoc Committee on University Values and Voice* reflects the deep exploration on the part of the Committee and Brown University community to bring definition to the values that have long guided and continue to fortify Brown as a community of teachers and learners. While the University's Charter and mission statement have given the institution clear purpose across generations, the University had never before defined its core institutional values.

The Committee is grateful to the thousands of members of the Brown community who contributed to this process. In March of this year, the Ad-hoc Committee on University Values and Voice shared an initial *Draft Statement of University Values and Voice* with the Brown community, inviting students, faculty, staff, and alumni to submit feedback through values@brown.edu or an online form. The Committee hosted four town halls to engage with members of the Brown community, and participated in discussions through a variety of campus meetings. Nearly 800 individuals and groups submitted written feedback and thousands attended town halls or campus meetings.

The Committee carefully considered all feedback and revised the draft statement to reduce ambiguity and address topics raised by members of the Brown community. The revised *Statement of University Values and Voice* has been presented to the Faculty Executive Committee for consideration and has been placed on the agenda for a vote of eligible faculty on May 6, 2025.

Consistent with the process set forth in its charge, the Committee produced a report that explains the nearly seven-month process that led to the *Statement of University Values and Voice*, deliberations by members of the Committee, and the detailed steps undertaken to identify core institutional values and to develop the *Statement of University Voice*. In a commitment to transparency, it also reflects upon the differences in opinion among members of the Committee and within the Brown community, and how the Committee responded to community feedback. In accord with the charge of the Committee, only the *Statement of University Values and Voice*, and not the associated report, which stands as an explanatory document, will be subject to a vote.

The biggest change in the *Statement of University Values and Voice* in response to feedback from the Brown community is the recognition and strengthening of community involvement in questions of core institutional values and University voice, through both the addition of a new core institutional value and also through a shared governance mechanism proposed by the Committee and subject to a vote of the eligible faculty.

Sincerely,

James R. Kellner

Professor of Ecology, Evolution and Organismal Biology

Chair of the Ad-hoc Committee on University Values and Voice (on behalf of the Committee)

**REPORT OF THE
AD-HOC COMMITTEE ON UNIVERSITY VALUES AND VOICE**

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1. Executive summary

The Ad-hoc Committee on University Values and Voice was charged with “defining the core values of Brown University” and with developing “a statement outlining how the University may use its voice publicly.” The Committee, consisting of six tenured members of the faculty, one undergraduate, one graduate student, one medical student, and two members of the senior administrative staff, reviewed historical and contemporary documents, including the Brown University Charter, the 2006 Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, letters and historical notes related to University business and academic decisions, minutes from meetings of the faculty, commentary and writing by Brown University presidents, and existing University policies. Those policies included the Brown Statement on Academic Freedom for Faculty and Students; the Gift Acceptance Policy; the Naming or Renaming University Buildings, Spaces, Programs and Positions Policy; the Public Statements Policy; the Political Activity Policy; and the University Code of Conduct. The Committee also consulted foundational documents articulating the purpose of higher education in America, including the 1915 and 1940 statements of the American Association of University Professors, and policies and statements of other universities.

The Brown University mission statement was the north star that guided the Committee to define core institutional values in accord with its charge: “The mission of Brown University is to serve the community, the nation and the world by discovering, communicating and preserving knowledge and understanding in a spirit of free inquiry, and by educating and preparing students to discharge the offices of life with usefulness and reputation. We do this through a partnership of students and teachers in a unified community known as a university-college.” This mission statement defines the fundamental purpose of the University as service to community, the nation, and the world, and further identifies five ways in which the mission is to be achieved: discovery, communication, preservation, education, and preparation. The perspective adopted by the Committee is that every significant action and every statement by the University, from admissions and hiring to research priorities and campus development, must advance the University mission in one of the five ways identified.

The core institutional values of Brown University are:

1. The pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

The pursuit of knowledge and understanding is the primary way in which the University serves the community, the nation, and the world. It does so through research and creative expression and by educating students duly qualified for discharging the offices of life with usefulness and reputation.

2. Academic freedom and freedom of expression.

Academic freedom is the freedom to investigate and learn without interference or censorship. Academic freedom is necessary for the production of knowledge and

understanding and imposes responsibilities on those who exercise it. Freedom of expression is the right to communicate ideas and engage in reasoned and informed protest, dissent, and criticism.

3. A commitment to openness and diversity of ideas, perspectives, and experiences.

Successful fulfillment of the University mission requires a wide range of ideas, perspectives, and experiences to advance knowledge and understanding.

4. Responsibility for a thriving academic community.

The University is a community of students, faculty, and staff, and holds itself responsible for generating the conditions necessary for every individual member of its community to thrive. This responsibility rests on the fundamental presumption that all persons have something of value to contribute to the University mission.

1.1. Statement of University Voice

University “voice” is defined as a public statement or action that intentionally expresses a position on an issue.

Being necessary to advance and defend the mission and core values of the institution, use of University voice should concern only those issues that directly influence the University mission. The University has discretion in the use of its voice on such issues, informed by the principles of shared governance.

The University must refrain from expressing positions on topics unrelated to its mission, because doing so risks undermining the public trust, damaging the conditions necessary for academic freedom, and preventing fulfillment of the University mission.

2. Background

Brown University is a private research university in Providence, Rhode Island. Founded in 1764, the University is dedicated to the advancement and dissemination of knowledge, and to the education and preparation of students. The matter before the Committee is defining the core institutional values of Brown University. The necessity of defining core institutional values follows from requests that the University take specific action or issue statements in response to social, political, or moral concerns of members of its community. Over previous decades, the University has been asked to take action or issue statements on hundreds of topics, ranging from issues that directly advance its mission to those that do not. Such requests often invoke University values, stating that University values should compel a specific public statement or action. Appeals to values appear in official University policies and charges, communications from administrative leaders, and statements from University divisions, schools, and departments.¹

In 2024, the University considered a student-led proposal to divest from 10 specific companies that “facilitate the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.” This request generated significant interest in the question of University values. Student groups in favor of and opposed to divestment presented to a University committee “responsible for reviewing whether the investment and expenditure of the University’s financial resources is conducted with ethical and moral standards consistent with the University’s mission and *values*” [emphasis added]. The committee recommended against divestment, and the Corporation of Brown University — the University’s highest governing body — accepted the recommendation. In a report explaining its recommendation, the committee noted ambiguity about University values.² Although the Brown University Charter and mission have been clearly articulated, the institution has never formally defined core institutional values. In the absence of such a definition, and in the face of disagreement among members of the Brown community about the fundamental purpose of the University, there remains uncertainty as to whether particular University statements or actions advance the University mission. The absence of a statement of core institutional values leaves open the question of when or how the University is able to act and speak in response to internal or external requests, and leaves unaddressed the question of when University actions are appropriate expressions of a position.

The Ad-hoc Committee on University Values and Voice was charged with “defining the core values of Brown University” and developing “a statement outlining how the University may use its voice publicly.” The motivation to define core institutional values originated in September 2024. The Committee was convened in December of that year by the Chair of the Faculty Executive Committee at the request of Brown University President Christina H. Paxson. Consistent with the process set forth in its charge, the Committee issued a request for nominations

¹ Public Statements Policy; Gift Acceptance Policy; Naming or Renaming University Buildings, Spaces, Programs and Positions Policy; the charge of the Advisory Committee on University Resources Management; and the University Code of Conduct.

² ACURM Report on 2024 Proposal by Brown Divest Coalition, Sept. 30, 2024

to all eligible members of the faculty and three student government bodies: the Undergraduate Council of Students, the Graduate Student Council, and the Medical Student Senate. The Committee received nominations from 17 members of the faculty in December, 2024, including 10 individuals within the humanities, six within the natural sciences, and one social scientist. The Undergraduate Council of Students and Graduate Student Council each nominated three students. The Medical Student Senate nominated one. All nominees were invited to be interviewed by the Chair of the Ad-hoc Committee on University Values and Voice and the Chair of the Faculty Executive Committee. One faculty member and one graduate student did not respond to the request to interview. An additional graduate student was nominated and interviewed. The Committee first met in January 2025.

All applicants were required to sign a confidentiality agreement and to disclose actual or potential conflicts of interest as a condition of membership on the Committee. Confidentiality was necessary to ensure that members could engage in frank and open discussion on the Committee about potentially charged and sensitive topics, and to ensure that confidential University data, if accessed by the Committee, would not be disclosed. The confidentiality agreement affirmed that members of the Committee would not disclose confidential deliberations of the Committee in any format, and that the agreement remains in effect during and after service on the Committee. The confidentiality agreement specifically did not prevent any member from publicly expressing an opinion on any issue at any time, including those issues deliberated by the Committee. The conflict of interest disclosure was consistent with the Brown University Conflict of Interest and Commitment Policy, and was designed to ensure that the Committee could complete its work with perceived and genuine integrity. Candidate members of the Committee were asked “to disclose any interest or relationship potentially or actually conflicting with the Committee’s charge.” Conflict of interest disclosures of selected members were reviewed by all members of the Committee, and the Committee voted on whether any members had conflicts of interest that supported recusal. The Committee determined by unanimous vote that the answer to that question was “no.”

The Committee consisted of six tenured members of the faculty, one undergraduate in computer science, one graduate student in biomedical engineering, one medical student, and two members of the senior administrative staff — one with expertise in University communications and institutional positioning, and one in planning and policy. Faculty members constituted the disciplines of computer science; ecology, evolution and organismal biology; environmental science and policy; German studies; philosophy; and religious studies. The Brown University Office of General Counsel provided administrative and legal advice to the Committee as needed.

2.1. Committee process

To identify core institutional values and to develop a statement outlining how the University may use its voice publicly, the Committee reviewed historical and contemporary documents, including the Brown University Charter, the 2006 Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, letters and historical notes related to University

business and academic decisions, minutes from meetings of the faculty, commentary and writing by Brown University presidents, and existing University policies. Those policies included the Brown Statement on Academic Freedom for Faculty and Students; the Gift Acceptance Policy; the Naming or Renaming University Buildings, Spaces, Programs and Positions Policy; the Public Statements Policy; the Political Activity Policy; and the University Code of Conduct. The Committee also consulted foundational documents articulating the purpose of higher education in America, including the 1915 and 1940 statements of the American Association of University Professors.^{3,4}

Members of the committee met twice weekly during a four-month period to deliberate, engaged in additional off-schedule meetings, and attended many events with members of the Brown community. Following three months of deliberation, an initial draft statement was shared with the Brown community in March 2025, after which the committee received feedback from members of the Brown community in a process that included:

- A. Hosting four town halls to engage with members of the Brown community (on April 7, 8, 9 and 10, 2025) providing an opportunity for students, faculty, staff and alumni to speak directly with members of the Ad-hoc Committee on University Values and Voice. No questions were screened and all participants were invited to speak in the order in which they appeared in the queue.
- B. Soliciting written community input through values@brown.edu. The inbox received 150 comments from alumni, 19 from students, 12 from faculty, nine from staff, one group outside the University, and 1 from a current Brown University parent. Some of these contributions were signed by multiple people (e.g., two faculty letters included numerous members of their respective academic units). These communications included a wide range of views that included short comments and long letters with historical analysis.
- C. Inviting written community input through an online form. This form received 89 comments from the on-campus community and 551 comments from alumni. The online form asked members of the Brown community to respond to the initial draft statement released in March 2025.
- D. Discussion with members of the Brown community through a variety of campus meetings, including the Brown University Community Council, a meeting of the Brown University Faculty, a meeting of Academic Chairs, Center and Institute Directors, a meeting of the Administrative Leadership Group, and the Academic and Administrative Information Meeting.

The Committee carefully considered all feedback and revised the draft statement to reduce ambiguity and address topics raised by members of the Brown community.

³ 1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure

⁴ 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure

3. The mission of Brown University

The Brown University mission statement was the north star that guided the Committee to define core institutional values in accord with its charge:

The mission of Brown University is to serve the community, the nation and the world by discovering, communicating and preserving knowledge and understanding in a spirit of free inquiry, and by educating and preparing students to discharge the offices of life with usefulness and reputation. We do this through a partnership of students and teachers in a unified community known as a university-college.⁵

This mission statement defines the fundamental purpose of the University as service to community, the nation, and the world, and further identifies five ways in which the mission is to be achieved: discovery, communication, preservation, education, and preparation. The perspective adopted by the Committee is that every significant action and every statement by the University, from admissions and hiring to research priorities and campus development, must advance the University mission in one of the five ways identified.

The Brown University mission statement distinguishes two broad pillars of University action: the advancement of knowledge and understanding through original research scholarship and creative expression,⁶ including the discovery, communication, and preservation of knowledge and understanding; and the education and preparation of students. The University is committed to “discovering, communicating and preserving knowledge and understanding” because knowledge and understanding are essential to human welfare and thus allow the University to serve society. Education is the process of instructing students to learn in subjects within which the University faculty and staff have specific expertise and competence.⁷ The University is committed to “educating and preparing students to discharge the offices of life with usefulness and reputation” because doing so allows graduates to become valuable and productive members of society.

But discharging the offices of life is not just making a living. To educate students in accord with the mission is to build character, to prepare students to participate in civil society, and to facilitate independent thinking. The ultimate measure of University success is not limited to educational outcomes and professional achievement, but whether the institution produces citizens who advance the interests of society in ways that reflect positively upon themselves and the University.

⁵ This version of the mission statement was adopted on April 17, 1998. Alternative formulations of the mission statement were debated at faculty meetings on Tuesday, Dec.7, 1997, and Tuesday, March 3, 1998.

⁶ The addition of “creative expression” is in response to community feedback noting that the phrase “original scholarship” in the initial draft was limiting, because it appeared to exclude artistic expression.

⁷ The original formulation of this sentence recognized contributions of faculty, but not staff, to education. As noted by a member of the Brown University staff, this framing asserted that “only faculty have a role to play in educating students and that students only learn from faculty.” The Committee acknowledges that members of the non-faculty staff contribute to many vital educational functions within the University.

3.1. Role of service to the community, the nation, and the world

Responses from members of the Brown community noted the prominent role of service to “the community, the nation and the world” in the Brown University mission statement, and the orientation toward service articulated in the University Charter. The University asserts that the production of knowledge and understanding and the education and preparation of students are the primary vehicles by which the institution serves society in fulfillment of its mission. But members of the University additionally serve in ways beyond the production of knowledge and understanding and the education and preparation of students, and the University itself has served society in different ways during times of national crisis.

Some Brown University faculty are expected to dedicate a percentage of their time to serving their professional disciplines and to society more broadly as a condition of employment written into contracts. Members of the faculty serve in advisory roles in national and international scientific and humanitarian societies, government bodies within the state and the nation, non-profit organizations, and private and public companies, in some cases in positions of named leadership.

The University’s commitment to national service was affirmed during both world wars, and again during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the first world war, the University “agreed to train young men for the officer corps, and to whatever other purpose the country needed.” A description of the University campus at the time stated, “‘At once, our grounds became an armed camp.’ The dining hall was now called a ‘mess,’ and the dormitories became a ‘barracks.’”⁸ The University fast-tracked students into the military during the second world war by teaching year round so that an eight-semester degree could be completed in three years. Instruction and campus activities were directed toward military preparation. The University “became one of eleven centers for meteorological training — of crucial use to aviation.” In 2020 and 2021, the University voluntarily participated in a program overseen by the National Guard to provide short-term residence hall housing to emergency personnel and healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The University donated supplies and protective equipment to Rhode Island hospitals, and again fast-tracked students to graduation, as it had done during the second world war, so that medical students could begin work in hospitals.

3.2. Distinction between core institutional values and community values

The objective of the Committee is to define core institutional values of Brown University. The Committee is not defining individual or community values. Core institutional values guide University decisions, serving as both guardrails and signposts in pursuit of the mission. Members of the Brown community are expected to conduct themselves in alignment with core institutional values. Core institutional values differ from both individual and community values. For example, individuals within the Brown community hold a wide range of religious views, and the community as a whole may embody in some sense the religious traditions underpinning the state and the

⁸ The quotations are from Widmer, T. (2015). “Brown: The History of an Idea.” Thames and Hudson, 157, 158 and 182.

nation, but the Brown University Charter requires the University to remain nonsectarian. Even if all members of the Brown community adopted the same religious denomination, this denomination and its beliefs would not become a core institutional value.

Separation between core institutional values and community values is necessary to preserve academic freedom and freedom of expression, and to advance the Brown University mission. For example, if the University, in its institutional capacity, forecloses debate on a particular topic by declaring an official point of view, and thus establishing a community consensus by decree, academic freedom is curtailed.⁹ Similarly, overwhelming community consensus can result in the tyranny of the majority over the minority, undermining academic freedom and freedom of expression for those holding minority viewpoints. The bright line separating core institutional values from community values prevents both of these outcomes by recognizing that core institutional values do not dictate community consensus, nor are they subject to being overruled.

At the same time, the distinction between core institutional values and community values does not mean that community values are irrelevant or ignorable. The Committee recognizes that the community plays an important role in the interpretation of core institutional values and the Brown University mission. Just as foundational laws in society outside the University can transcend national community values at any one time, the interpretation and application of laws can change significantly due to legal rulings, subsequent amendments, and changing context. This same productive tension exists between core institutional and community values within the University.

The Committee identified four tests for the determination of a core institutional value. The Committee required that core institutional values meet each of the criteria below.

1. Alignment with mission and history: A core institutional value must be demonstrably connected to the University mission and supported by evidence of recent and historical action.
2. Aspirational character: A core institutional value must articulate a goal toward which the University demonstrably strives, and by the light of which it can assess its own performance.
3. The ability to frame decisions: A core institutional value must provide a clear standard for guiding University decisions.
4. Binding obligation: A core institutional value places affirmative duties upon the University and its members.

4. The Core Institutional Values

⁹ This perspective is articulated in the University of Chicago Report on the University's Role in Political and Social Action, which states, "The instrument of dissent and criticism is the individual faculty member or the individual student. The university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic."

4.1 Pursuit of knowledge and understanding

The pursuit of knowledge and understanding is the primary way in which the University serves the community, the nation, and the world. It does so through research and creative expression and by educating students duly qualified for discharging the offices of life with usefulness and reputation.

The pursuit of knowledge and understanding is not without constraint, and the University may in very rare cases accept limitations on the ways in which knowledge and understanding are produced. For example, the University is obligated not to disclose protected health information of patients who participate in research projects that it administers, and some research may provide members of the University community with other materials that are restricted from public access, such as incarceration records or confidential technology. Such limitations are not necessarily inconsistent with the pursuit of knowledge and understanding “in a spirit of free inquiry” as defined in the mission statement. The key question is not whether all findings may be publicly disclosed, but whether knowledge creation ultimately serves society.

4.2. Academic freedom and freedom of expression

Academic freedom is the freedom to investigate and learn without interference or censorship. Academic freedom is necessary for the production of knowledge and understanding and imposes responsibilities on those who exercise it. Freedom of expression is the right to communicate ideas and engage in reasoned and informed protest, dissent, and criticism. The right to protest, dissent, and criticize is not unlimited. Actions that deprive others in the Brown community of the right to participate fully in University life are contrary to the University mission.

As a core institutional value, academic freedom is linked to the University mission because it is necessary for the production of knowledge and understanding, and for the education of students to have meaning. Limitations on academic freedom, such as pressure from inside or outside the University not to investigate disfavored topics, threatens the University mission.

Feedback from members of the Brown community revealed different perspectives on academic freedom, freedom of expression, shared governance, and democratic principles within the University. The Committee believes that academic freedom is distinct among these elements. Academic freedom for faculty is earned through training and demonstrated competence, and is therefore limited to areas of professional knowledge, in contrast to freedom of expression, which all members of the Brown community possess outside the University by law and within the University in accord with this core institutional value.

A member of the faculty could discuss a controversial article on a disfavored topic with students under the aegis of academic freedom if this article were within the general area of the subject. The University would be obligated to defend the right of the faculty member to teach, even in the face of attack inside or outside the University, on the grounds of academic freedom. Similarly, a member of the faculty could investigate a topic that is offensive to lawmakers who seek to constrain or prohibit investigation on the basis of viewpoint. The University would

similarly be obligated to uphold academic freedom. But members of the faculty should avoid introducing material into the classroom that has no relation to the subject at issue.¹⁰ The critical question is the definition of “related to the subject at issue.” The Committee cannot adjudicate this question here, believing it to be beyond the scope of its charge, but notes that academic freedom grants members of the faculty the right to communicate on matters of professional competence. It does not grant the right to claim academic authority on unrelated topics. Academic freedom, though foundational, is more limited than freedom of expression.

Members of the faculty may exercise academic freedom when participating in shared governance, but shared governance is not academic freedom. Shared governance refers to the joint responsibility of the faculty, University administration, and the Corporation of Brown University to govern the institution through formal decision-making processes. Faculty may exercise academic freedom through shared governance when core academic issues are adjudicated, including curricular design and hiring decisions among other topics, or when they are addressing matters of institutional policy or action. But routine administrative or managerial issues deliberated through shared governance that do not depend on earned competence of the faculty member as such are not necessarily expressions of academic freedom.

Consequently, the University employs some democratic principles in its day-to-day operations through the mechanism of shared governance, but the University is not a democracy. In general, decision-making authority tracks with responsibility. In the classroom, faculty have the right to determine what they teach, and how they do so. What oversight exists is administered by other members of the faculty, not by administrative staff. Similarly, members of the staff are charged with decision-making authority within their areas of professional competence, including government relations, legal issues, facilities and grounds, food services, communications, policy development, financial management, and so on. Democratic principles and shared governance cannot extend to academic freedom without dissolving the foundation on which academic freedom resides. A majority cannot bind the conscience of other members of the University community by declaring some topics off limits or compulsory without betraying the very meaning of academic freedom. This is why academic freedom is an individual right, not a collective right.

4.2.1. Academic freedom within the University

A commitment to academic freedom appears in the original Brown University Charter and has been reaffirmed multiple times in the University’s history. In an 1850 report to the Corporation of Brown University, then president Francis Wayland went so far as to argue that Brown University students should be encouraged to study whatever they want, all that they want, and nothing but

¹⁰ The principle that academic freedom comes with responsibility and that faculty should avoid introducing unrelated material into the classroom is articulated in the 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure. This document also discusses the “special position [of professors] in the community.”

what they want.¹¹ This vision recognized academic freedom for students in the selection of courses, and foreshadowed the abolishment of core distribution requirements in undergraduate education with the adoption of the Open Curriculum in 1969, as well as the establishment of the Open Graduate Program in 2011. In 1966, the University affirmed the value of academic freedom through the Brown University Statement on Academic Freedom for Faculty and Students. In 2025, when the University was threatened with the loss of federal funding, Brown University President Christina H. Paxson stated that “Brown will always defend academic freedom and freedom of expression, for the University as an institution and for individual members of our community.”¹²

Sometimes the exercise of academic freedom will be controversial, but academic freedom does not conflict with other core institutional values, and is necessary for fulfillment of the University mission. For example, members of the faculty and recognized student groups have the right to invite speakers to campus in accord with the University Statement on Academic Freedom for Faculty and Students. Such speakers may sometimes be controversial or offensive, possibly even to majorities of the Brown community, who may argue that the existence of an offensive speaker on campus threatens other core institutional values. However, the pursuit of knowledge and understanding requires academic freedom and the widest possible range of ideas, perspectives, and experiences on campus. Accepting responsibility for a thriving academic community compels the University to respect the judgment of faculty and recognized student groups who choose to exercise the right to invite speakers to campus. As a general matter, a commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression means all subjects and viewpoints, including, and arguably especially, those that majorities find offensive.¹³ There are limits, but the Committee believes those limits should be those dictated by law, and that the University itself has an obligation to provide a forum for the free exchange of ideas.

4.3. A commitment to openness and diversity of ideas, perspectives, and experiences

Successful fulfillment of the University mission requires a wide range of ideas, perspectives, and experiences to advance knowledge and understanding. The initial draft statement shared with the Brown community in March 2025 did not elaborate on how diversity is defined in the context of this core institutional value, which succinctly affirmed “A commitment to openness and diversity.” The University recognizes that the production of knowledge and understanding will not flourish in the context of intellectual homogeneity or conformity. Groupthink is corrosive to the production of knowledge and understanding. It limits the range of investigation not through

¹¹ Wayland stated that “The various courses should be so arranged, that, in so far as it is practicable, every student might study what he chose, all that he chose, and nothing but what he chose.” Wayland, F. (1850). Report to the Corporation of Brown University on Changes in the System of Collegiate Education. George H. Whitney. Page 51.

¹² Principles Upholding Brown's Academic Freedom, Brown Office of Media Relations News Release, March 20, 2025.

¹³ Former Brown University President Ruth J. Simmons stated, “I won’t ask you to embrace someone who offends your humanity through the exercise of free speech. But I would ask you to understand that the price of your own freedom is permitting the expression of such opinions.” Opening Convocation Address of Brown University President Ruth J. Simmons. Sept. 4, 2001.

coercion but through ignorance, and results in knowledge that is tentative. A commitment to openness and diversity of ideas, perspectives, and experiences allows the exercise of academic freedom to serve the production of knowledge and understanding.

At its founding, Brown set itself apart by ensuring that access to education would not be limited by sectarian affiliation. More than a statement of religious tolerance, the University Charter linked the absence of sectarian tests to viewpoint, guaranteeing all members “full, free, absolute, and uninterrupted liberty of conscience,” and by asserting that “sectarian differences of opinions shall not make any part of the public and classical instruction.”

The University has demonstrated a persistent commitment to openness, and over time the institution has broadened its community to include people with perspectives and experiences that were new. At its founding the University was open to Protestant men. In 1770, the Corporation clarified that “children of Jews” could be admitted. The first African Americans were admitted in 1873, and the first women in 1891.¹⁴ The University now admits people from every corner of society in the nation and world, including people who are rural and urban, military veterans from the United States and abroad, and students who attended public, private, and religious secondary schools. The value this brings to the Brown community is the range of ideas, perspectives, and experiences that inform investigation and learning, scholarly debate, and the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

4.4. Responsibility for a thriving academic community

The University is a community of students, faculty, and staff, and holds itself responsible for generating the conditions necessary for every individual member of its community to thrive. This responsibility rests on the fundamental presumption that all persons have something of value to contribute to the University mission.

The initial draft statement shared with the Brown community in March 2025 did not include this core institutional value. The draft version was “Respect for others and the University mission.” Feedback from members of the Brown community was mixed. Some responses questioned the need for a core institutional value to assert respect for the University mission. Others requested clarification regarding the definition of “others,” with some responses indicating that others should include students, faculty, staff, and alumni, and other responses suggesting that the University has certain obligations to members of the community, the nation, and the world beyond its campus. Some responses expressed the concern that respect was linked to codes of conduct and behavior in the initial draft statement, with one noting that the proposed core institutional value could impose “a respectability standard on discourse within the University beyond traditional limits on the First Amendment.”

There were further differences in view among responses and, indeed, members of the Committee about the basis on which respect is owed to others, however defined. Some believe that

¹⁴ Widmer, T. (2015). “Brown: The History of an Idea.” Thames and Hudson, 42, 134. In 1873, George W. Milford and Inman E. Page became the first African American students at Brown University.

respect is owed to all persons on the basis of human dignity. Alternative views hold that respect in the institutional sense is earned and subject to standards of conduct. Some believe that disrespect is obligated under some situations and expressed concern that enshrining respect as a core institutional value could threaten academic freedom. Other responses noted that respect is already addressed in the University Code of Conduct and suggested that its repetition among the set of core institutional values was redundant. In this range of perspectives, there was a distinction evident between those viewing respect as a value and those viewing respect as a behavior.

The challenge of defining respect as an institutional value compelled the Committee to consider an alternative formulation. This formulation — “Responsibility for a thriving academic community” — recognizes that the University has obligations to its community of students, faculty, and staff. It affirms that the interests and needs of the community are not ignorable or irrelevant, while maintaining the distinction between institutional and community values. This core institutional value provides a mechanism for the community to hold the University accountable in accord with the principle of partnership expressed in the Brown University mission.

5. Statement of Brown University Voice

University “voice” is defined as a public statement or action that intentionally expresses a position on an issue.

Being necessary to advance and defend the mission and core values of the institution, use of University voice should concern only those issues that directly influence the University mission. The University has discretion in the use of its voice on such issues, informed by the principles of shared governance.

The University must refrain from expressing positions on topics unrelated to its mission, because doing so risks undermining the public trust, damaging the conditions necessary for academic freedom, and preventing fulfillment of the University mission.

5.1. Explanation of the Statement of University Voice

Here the Committee explains the construction of the Statement of University Voice and contrasts the Brown University Statement of University Voice with a well-known articulation of institutional neutrality. The first sentence provides a definition of University voice.

The second sentence clarifies the purpose of University voice and why it is used. University voice is “necessary to advance and defend the mission and core values of the institution.” Consequently, “University voice should concern only those issues that directly influence the University mission.” In the initial draft, the statement of University voice identified five core functions of the University to determine whether an issue directly influences the mission. Here that criterion is eliminated, granting the University broader discretion in the use of its voice, but only when issues directly influence the mission. This recognizes that the mission itself may change over time, adding or subtracting core functions. This change also recognizes that members of the Brown community will have varied interpretations about the degree of alignment between issues,

core institutional values, and the mission at any one time. The present formulation engenders a partnership between the community and the University, while recognizing that the purpose of University voice is to advance and defend the mission and core institutional values.

The third sentence recognizes that the University has discretion in the use of its voice, and notes that use of University voice will be informed by the principles of shared governance. The University will sometimes not speak or act publicly, even when an issue is aligned with the mission. This does not mean the University is abdicating responsibility, or that it is not acting in ways that advance its mission and values that cannot be publicly seen, but recognizes that the interests of the institution will sometimes be served by not intentionally establishing a public position.

The fourth sentence expresses that the University “must refrain” from expressing positions on topics unrelated to its mission, and explains that doing so compromises the University by “undermining the public trust, damaging the conditions necessary for academic freedom, and preventing fulfillment of the University mission.” Ultimately, these two examples lead to the same conclusion: undermining fulfillment of the Brown University mission. The Committee highlights the public trust and academic freedom as the primary ways in which fulfillment of the mission is threatened by expression of positions on unrelated topics.

Some responses argued that limiting the use of University voice only to those issues that directly influence the mission is a form of moral failure or cowardice. However, the Committee believes that the social obligation of the University to the community, the nation, and the world is to fulfill its mission through the discovery, communication, and preservation of knowledge and understanding and the education and preparation of students. It is not to advance specific solutions, in its institutional capacity, to an array of important problems. This does not preclude individual members of the University community from speaking to these issues. In fact the core institutional value of academic freedom and freedom of expression elevates the capacity of individuals within the Brown community to communicate ideas, and to engage in reasoned and informed protest, dissent, and criticism, including the right to criticize the Brown University mission and matters of alignment between the mission and issues.

Fulfillment of the Brown University mission requires public trust. The University appeals to the general public for support, through federal funding, tuition payments, gifts, and the maintenance of favorable treatment, such as tax-exempt status under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Use of University voice to establish positions on topics unrelated to the mission abuses the public trust, undermines confidence in the University, and endangers the conditions necessary for the mission to be fulfilled.¹⁵

Fulfillment of the University mission further depends on the ability of its faculty and staff to teach, investigate, and learn without interference or censorship. When the University uses its

¹⁵ The argument that public and private non-proprietary universities are bound by a public trust is developed in the 1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure.

voice to establish an official position on an unrelated topic, especially a topic that is politically, socially, or morally contested, interference has occurred and academic freedom is threatened. Such expressions establish official points of view to which members of the community may feel pressured to conform. These expressions tacitly reveal what the University may or may not defend, and which views one is encouraged to hold as a member of the community in good standing, and therefore threaten academic freedom.

5.2. Relationship to institutional neutrality

Members of the Brown community questioned whether the Statement of University Voice establishes a formal position of institutional neutrality. The foundational document on institutional neutrality within many universities is the 1967 Kalven Report of the University of Chicago, which famously asserts that universities “cannot take collective action on the issues of the day” without inhibiting academic freedom. This report highlights that universities have a special obligation to ensure “full freedom of dissent” and that when collective action is taken, the cost of such action is the “censuring of any minority” who does not accept the prevailing view. This perspective is understood to mean that universities must not issue statements on social, political, or moral issues. In this sense, some may read the Brown University Statement of University Voice as consistent with institutional neutrality.

However, the Committee sees a distinction between the Brown University Statement and institutional neutrality as typically defined. The Committee recognizes that the University will sometimes be compelled to “take collective action” through the use of its voice to establish a position on an issue to advance or defend its mission. The fact that an issue is politically partisan, socially contested, or morally ambiguous does not mean that the University cannot address it through the use of its voice. The question is whether the use of University voice is aligned with the mission and core institutional values of the institution or not.

For example, Brown University filed an amicus brief in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* in support of respondents.¹⁶ This amicus brief unquestionably and intentionally established a public position on a topic. It thus would have qualified as the use of University voice under the Brown University Statement. But it is also consistent with the mission of the University to file an amicus brief in a case before the Supreme Court of the United States that concerns admission of undergraduates. In such a situation, there can be no neutral. The University either will file a brief or it will not, and the brief will be in support of one side of the argument or the other. The University cannot censor itself in the name of alleged neutrality, even when the issue is politically polarizing. If the University believes that the use of its voice in such a case is likely to advance the mission, it must have the discretion to exercise its voice, and to explain the justification for its decision. In this way, the Statement of University Voice differs from ordinary institutional neutrality.

¹⁶ Brief for Amici Curiae in Support of Respondents, *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*. Supreme Court of the United States.

There are also situations where the University will engage in actions that are non-neutral in political, social, or moral terms without establishing a position. Such actions are thus not governed by the Statement of University Voice, which requires both intentionality and the establishment of a position. For example, the institution provides employee health insurance programs that include coverage for certain forms of medical care that are subject to political or social controversy. These programs either will, or will not, provide access to such care, and there is no decision that is neutral. Such matters are thus operational decisions that are necessary for the University to function, and are not governed by the Statement of University Voice. Actions that are not uses of University voice underscore that action in the absence of voice does not establish a position unintentionally, and that the absence of voice does not belie lack of concern for members of the University community.

Finally, although the University may use its voice to establish non-neutral positions on issues related to its mission and core institutional values, the University must be mindful that repeatedly expressing positions on issues that are aligned with only one political party, only one side of a socially contested issue, or only one moral understanding of a problem risks establishing a tacit position in the eyes of its community and general public.

5.3. The interpretation of institutional silence

Some members of the Brown community and Committee believe that the absence of voice can be interpreted as the establishment of a position. Among those who hold this view, the fact that the University does not express a public position with respect to a given issue implies that the University is afraid to establish a position, “cowardly,” unconcerned with the issue, or that it “does not care” about members of its community, who may feel strongly about the issue.

The Committee believes that the problem of institutional silence is compounded when the University strays from its mission, and therefore that restricting the use of University voice only to those issues that directly influence the mission of the institution will, over time, solve the problem of interpretation of institutional silence. When the University repeatedly expresses positions on unrelated topics, but then refuses to express a position on a separate topic, a reasonable observer will infer that the University is expressing a tacit position through the absence of voice. The solution to this problem is not issuance of positions on all things, but rather maintaining the discipline of a firm commitment to exercising University voice only on matters directly related to the mission.

5.4. Precedents for institutional advocacy

The Committee recognizes inconsistency in historical use of University voice, and that the University has expressed symbolic positions in the past. For example, a 1978 report establishing the Brown University Advisory Committee on Corporate Responsibility in Investment stated that “the University should remain neutral on political issues which do not directly affect its

educational functions.”¹⁷ And a 1986 report describing the University’s decision to divest from companies operating in apartheid South Africa stated that “The university does not exist to coerce others into observing social and political doctrines it establishes. Having struggled for decades to avoid the censorship of others, it should be most hesitant in seeking to force others to bow to its view of the true word.”¹⁸

But the University committee that recommended excluding tobacco manufacturers from the investment portfolio in 2003 justified the decision as having “significant symbolic value.”¹⁹ In 2006, when the University extracted itself from investments in companies associated with the humanitarian crisis in Sudan, public statements referred to divestment action as a “strong statement by the University community.”²⁰ Neither of these decisions justified their actions through impact on the Brown University mission.

The University need not be held to its past use of voice as the sole determinant of future action — or, as stated by one member of the faculty who submitted feedback to the Committee, “history has a voice but not a veto.” History teaches that the University has been open to change, to admitting more and different kinds of people, and to adjusting the way in which it instructs undergraduates. The University, like all organizations, will sometimes fall short of its foundational principles and will modify the ways in which it operates.

5.5. Standards for action as voice

Members of the Brown community sometimes request that the University modify its business practices to express a position on a political, social, or moral issue. It must refrain from doing so when the issue at hand is not directly related to the mission. This does not mean that the University may never modify its business practices in response to requests from members of the Brown community. But when intended to establish a position on an issue, the condition for doing so must be alignment with the mission.

For example, the University might choose to avoid accepting a gift from a person convicted of fraud, since doing so could damage the University’s reputation. Such an action, in the absence of an intentional public position, does not exercise University voice. When making purchasing decisions, the University may prefer Rhode Island companies over those out-of-state. A preference for Rhode Island companies is justified if local partnerships offer practical benefits to the

¹⁷ Statement of the Advisory Committee on Corporate Responsibility in Investment. Jan. 12, 1979.

¹⁸ Committee Reports on South Africa, Corporation subcommittee to examine policies regarding South African investments. A special supplement to the *George Street Journal*, February 1986.

¹⁹ From the Recommendation to Exclude Investment in Tobacco, unanimously adopted at the May 7, 2003, meeting of the Advisory Committee in Corporate Responsibility in Investing.

²⁰ Brown Votes to Divest from Sudan in Response to Genocide, Brown Office of Media Relations News Release, Feb. 25, 2006. This statement includes the following: “‘This is a critically important and strong statement by the University community regarding our abhorrence of the genocidal actions being supported and undertaken by the Sudanese government,’ said Brown University President Ruth J. Simmons. ‘We declare our solidarity with the peoples of the Darfur region of Sudan whose struggle to live in peace, freedom and security is an issue of pressing global concern.’”

University. But these actions, in the absence of an intentional public position, are not uses of University voice. They do not, for example, assert that Rhode Island businesses are superior to those in other states. In another example, over the last decade, the Brown Investment Office has reduced investment exposure to fossil fuels in the University's investment portfolio at the same time that some members of the Brown community requested divestment from fossil fuels. The Brown Investment Office has explained that the decision to reduce exposure to fossil fuels was based on an investment thesis that fossil fuel assets could suffer a premature loss in value. This decision was not an intentional expression of a position and takes no view on the ethics of fossil fuel consumption.

The distinction between intentional public statements and routine decisions is the difference between “un-investment” for purely financial reasons, and divestment, which seeks to establish a political, moral, or social position. This is the reason why some members of the Brown community seek divestment even in cases where the University has little to no direct exposure to the company or companies in question: the financial impact is not the point, the statement is.

Thus, action is voice when it is used to establish an intentional position on an issue. Such action must be aligned with the mission and core institutional values. In cases where University actions could be incorrectly interpreted as social, political, or moral statements on issues unrelated to the mission, the University must ensure that its communications do not tacitly suggest that such a statement has been made: the University may not hide behind inaction to claim action.

5.6. Scope of University voice

Members of the Brown community questioned the scope of University voice, who exercises it, and who, specifically, is outside the scope of the Statement of University Voice. University voice is exercised by the University in its institutional capacity. Anyone intentionally establishing a position on behalf of the University is speaking with University voice. The President, Provost, members of the Corporation of Brown University, Academic Deans and other senior administrators may speak with University voice. Schools, academic units, and administrative units, including University departments, may not speak with University voice, as described in the Brown University Public Statements Policy.

Rank-and-file members of the faculty and students are outside the scope of the Statement of University Voice. The Statement of University Voice does not inhibit academic activity or the speech of individual members of the faculty or student body. While rank-and-file staff are generally regarded as part of the University administration, and therefore their speech can be construed as University voice, staff share the right to free expression when speaking as individuals, though not when speaking on behalf of University operations. All forms of scholarly communication, including artistic expression, are outside the scope of University voice and protected by the core institutional value of academic freedom and free inquiry. Such communication and expression is not inhibited in any way by the Statement of University Voice.

Thus, the fundamental position is that use of University voice must be directly related to the mission.