

Dear Chancellor Mnookin and President Rothman,

As you know, free speech and academic freedom on college campuses across the nation are under assault by the federal government in ways reminiscent of the McCarthyist “red scare” of the 1950s. The Trump Administration has ordered campuses to cease using or teaching censored words and phrases they dislike, rescinded research contracts solely based on banned keywords, and threatened accreditation and federal funding for institutions that fail to comply with this campaign of government censorship.

But in recent weeks, the actions of the federal government have entered an alarming and dangerous new phase. Faculty at Texas A&M and Texas State University have been fired for teaching banned course content and comments made at a conference. Negotiations with Ivy League institutions have included demands for governmental intrusion into admissions, hiring, and curricular decisions. A student was arrested and expelled for voicing opinions about Charlie Kirk, which comes after the detainment of several students for protesting and writing op-eds against the war in Gaza. UC Berkeley provided a list of 160 faculty, staff, and student names to the government for purported yet unproven “antisemitic” statements or behavior.

Worse, the rhetoric surrounding campus speech and faculty themselves is becoming more aggressive, with prominent government officials falsely charging that faculty are all “radical Leftists” and indoctrinating youth in violent left-wing ideology. Some prominent voices have explicitly blamed faculty and higher education for the assassination of Charlie Kirk. As a result, many of your students, faculty, staff, and leadership are scared not only for their physical safety but that of their families on and off campus.

We, as experts in our fields, must have freedom from government interference to teach our courses, conduct our research, and engage in discussions with students without fear of censorship and intimidation. Not being able to teach or discuss certain facts or ideas that contradict some ideological positions is not the way to prepare Wisconsin’s future workforce, citizenry, and leaders for the uncertain times that lie ahead. We urge you to take the following actions:

1. Issue a public statement that you will protect the 1st amendment rights and academic freedom of faculty, staff, students, and administrators at UW–Madison and other UW campuses that abide by existing policies governing free speech and academic freedom on campus.
2. Confirm that if names or information are sought from UW–Madison or other UW campuses from the federal government regarding “antisemitism” or ideas disliked by the current administration, the Faculty Senate, Academic Staff Assemblies, and other shared governance bodies at each campus will be immediately consulted. The university must exhaust all legal remedies to protect targeted members of our community.
3. Publicly state that you will not treat published course descriptions as legally binding documents, as course syllabi often depart from these descriptions for various reasons as a matter of necessity. This practice was recently used in Texas as grounds for faculty dismissals with no due process or recognition of this fact regarding the relationship between course descriptions, syllabi, and actual classroom instruction.
4. Immediately launch a public education campaign on the nature and importance of free speech and academic freedom in higher education, including how current governmental censorship inhibits scientific inquiry, student learning, and the “sifting and winnowing” for the truth. It is time to advance a counter-narrative that denounces the current wave of censorship

while asserting that free and open inquiry is critical to our charge to educate the citizens and workers of the future. The new report [*On Title VI, Discrimination, and Academic Freedom*](#) from Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure at AAUP provides an excellent source for this work.

The campus community **needs** leadership to stand firm for our principles as a public university by defending our rights and work as scholars, educators, and independent thinkers. Anticipatory obedience does not work, and complying with this government's outrageous anti-free speech demands would violate the core principles of the University of Wisconsin. We are in a fight for our very survival to ensure that the universities of the great state of Wisconsin can continue to thrive as research and teaching institutions dedicated to advancing the economy, knowledge, and well-being of the state and nation. Please do not sacrifice the substance to preserve the shadow.

Signed,

Executive Committee, [UW-Madison chapter of the American Association of University Professors](#)

Executive Committee, [Wisconsin University Union](#)

Steering Committee, [United Faculty & Academic Staff](#) (American Federation of Teachers Local 223)

Executive Board, [Teaching Assistants' Association](#) (American Federation of Teachers Local 3220)