

Statement from the Northwestern University Faculty Senate on Academic Freedom

June 1, 2017

The Faculty Senate has been asked to comment on the letter sent to the administration of Northwestern University about the demonstration in Professor Beth Redbird's Sociology 201 class, in which students, in violation of the Disruption and Demonstration Policy in the Student Handbook, entered and loudly disrupted the invited speaker, a public relations officer in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. We believe that consequences for such violations, and the process of the adjudication of consequences, are the responsibility of the administration. We support the intention of the Student Handbook, which is to prohibit disruption of classes and other instructional events. We urge the administration to ensure that all students are aware of and reminded about the Student Handbook and the consequences for its violation.

The Faculty Senate strongly supports academic freedom. Critical to academic freedom is the right to invite speakers with diverse opinions to our classes. The selection of speakers is part of the design of the syllabus, which, of course, is under faculty control. This design and this construction of the class experience are essential practices of academic freedom, giving it meaning in our teaching and the discussion of our research. We strongly believe that the University administration should not oversee decisions by individual faculty regarding the organization, design, or content of our classes and the pedagogical intent of our teaching. Faculty have a right to teach a wide variety of views, including views that may not be popular with some members of the University community. We have a right to ask any question and to teach any issue with that open method of inquiry. We believe this must be done openly and in an evenhanded manner. Within our classrooms, we do not silence the unpopular views; rather, we encourage exploration and debate them. We are responsible for creating classrooms where our students can question any speaker or any perspective in a civil and academic manner. This is the very essence of our academic community, and we intend to defend this value as we defend the idea of the University itself.

Classes are not safe spaces. They are the location of our most vivid discourse. They may be contentious and they may be challenging. Most of all, they must remain places that generate the very debates that surround the most important issues of our time. While there is certainly a place for protest on college campuses, that place is not within the classroom. We write to ensure that our colleagues on the faculty understand that we are responsible for the discourse that delineates our freedom as academics.