



samru
students' association
of mount royal university

Submission on Institutional Neutrality

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Introduction

The Students' Association of Mount Royal University (SAMRU) represents over 15,000 undergraduate students at Mount Royal University (MRU). On August 27, 2026, members of SAMRU's Representation Executive Council (REC) participated in a Ministry of Advanced Education's student engagement session regarding the Government of Alberta's consideration of institutional neutrality requirements for publicly funded post-secondary institutions.

SAMRU supports the protection of freedom of expression, academic freedom, intellectual diversity, and open debate. These principles are fundamental to post-secondary education. Our concern is not with these objectives, but with whether an additional institutional neutrality framework addresses a demonstrated policy gap and whether it can be implemented without unintended consequences for academic freedom, institutional autonomy, student supports, reconciliation, competitiveness, or the ability of post-secondary institutions to fulfill their mandates.

Demonstrating the Need for Additional Regulation

Alberta's publicly funded post-secondary institutions already operate within an established free-expression framework. In 2019, all 26 publicly funded institutions were required to adopt the University of Chicago Principles on Free Expression or develop a policy consistent with those principles. All 26 institutions complied with this direction, and additional provincial reporting requirements concerning campus free speech were introduced in 2023.¹

At MRU, these provincial requirements are reflected in the University's existing Expression and Free Speech Policy. The policy commits MRU to an environment of free and open inquiry in which members of the University community may "speak, write, listen, challenge and learn" free from harassment or discrimination. It further states that the University will not suppress presentations or debate because the views expressed are considered offensive, unwise, immoral, extreme, harmful, incorrect, or wrongheaded.² The policy also expressly states that neither the University nor members of its community should shield students from ideas or opinions they disagree with or find offensive.³

Institutional neutrality represents a distinct and additional policy intervention. While the Chicago Principles primarily concern freedom of expression within the university community, the University of Chicago's 1967 Kalven Report addresses whether the university as an institution should take collective positions on political and social issues. The Kalven Report grounds institutional restraint in the protection of individual inquiry and academic freedom.⁴

During the August 27, 2026, engagement, Advanced Education identified individual student complaints, conversations with the Minister, and concerns from students who felt uncomfortable expressing perspectives in classrooms as factors informing the proposed direction. SAMRU REC recognizes that these experiences should be taken seriously. However, the engagement did not provide information regarding the number, prevalence, nature, or substantiation of these complaints, whether existing institutional processes had failed to address them, or whether the concerns represent a system-wide issue.

Individual complaints provide valuable qualitative information, but they should not automatically be treated as representative of Alberta's broader post-secondary student population. This distinction is particularly important when considering additional province-wide regulation. At MRU, the University's 2024–25 annual reporting identified zero complaints related to free speech and zero events cancelled by the University for free-speech reasons.⁵

Before establishing additional province-wide regulation, SAMRU REC recommends that the Alberta Ministry of Advanced Education evaluate the effectiveness of Alberta's existing free-expression framework, including the policies institutions have already implemented in response to provincial requirements, and clearly demonstrate what policy gap remains that an institutional neutrality requirement is intended to address.

Clearly Defining Institutional Neutrality

One of the most significant challenges identified during the engagement was the absence of clear definitions for concepts central to the proposed framework.

Terms including institutional neutrality, political issue, social issue, ideological position, neutral learning environment, institutional mandate, pedagogical objective, and what constitutes “imposing” an ideological position require clear and consistent definitions before institutions can reasonably be expected to develop or comply with neutrality policies.

Institutional neutrality must also account for the practical responsibilities of post-secondary institutions. Universities routinely make decisions regarding curriculum, research, partnerships, procurement, student services, employment, community relationships, and strategic priorities. Many legitimate institutional decisions can intersect with politically or socially contested issues.

The original Kalven framework itself recognizes that institutional restraint cannot be entirely absolute and identifies exceptional circumstances involving the university’s mission and the values of free inquiry.⁴ Canadian institutions adopting more recent approaches have similarly established boundaries around neutrality. Memorial University’s 2026 statement, for example, does not apply to students, faculty, staff, or academic units and explicitly preserves academic freedom, institutional responsibilities, and supports for affected community members.⁶ Carleton University has instead adopted the language of “institutional impartiality,” while maintaining commitments to academic freedom, human rights, inclusion, and its core institutional mission and values.⁷

A provincial framework must therefore distinguish between inappropriate institutional political advocacy and the legitimate exercise of academic, operational, governance, and fiduciary responsibilities. A framework intended to prevent ideological enforcement should itself be objective, consistently applied, and viewpoint-neutral.

Protecting Academic Freedom and the Learning Environment

Universities are environments where students encounter unfamiliar perspectives, challenge ideas, engage in debate, and learn to critically evaluate evidence. MRU's existing Expression and Free Speech Policy protects free and open inquiry while expressly distinguishing these protections from the University's separate responsibilities and obligations concerning academic freedom.⁸

MRU's broader strategic framework also demonstrates that free expression and inclusion need not be treated as competing objectives. Vision 2030 identifies inquisitiveness as a core institutional value, including critical thought, new perspectives, scholarly inquiry, and dialogue rooted in free expression, while also identifying belonging, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility as institutional priorities.⁹

SAMRU REC is therefore concerned about how restrictions on delivering programs in a manner that appears to "impose" an ideological position could be interpreted without clear safeguards. Undefined requirements could create uncertainty for instructors about whether legitimate teaching of controversial subjects, disciplinary conclusions, or academic assessment could result in neutrality complaints.

Academic freedom must continue to protect legitimate curriculum development, teaching, research, scholarship, critical inquiry, and academic assessment according to disciplinary standards. Freedom of expression also does not require every position to receive equal academic credibility where evidence or disciplinary standards support different conclusions.

Similarly, a “neutral learning environment” should not be understood as an environment free from disagreement or intellectual discomfort. MRU’s existing policy explicitly recognizes the right of community members to criticize and question the views of others and states that students should not be shielded from ideas or opinions they disagree with or find offensive. At the same time, the policy maintains restrictions on expression that violates the law or constitutes threats, harassment, or hate speech.¹⁰

Students should be protected from discrimination, harassment, threats, intimidation, and retaliation; however, encountering challenging material or having one’s ideas criticized is an ordinary and often necessary component of post-secondary education. Any framework should clearly distinguish between discomfort arising from disagreement and conduct that creates an unsafe or discriminatory learning environment.

Protecting Institutional Autonomy and Governance

Institutional neutrality is intended, in part, to prevent institutions from imposing political or ideological positions. The structure used to enforce neutrality must therefore ensure that the government itself does not become the source of inappropriate political influence.

During the engagement, Advanced Education discussed potential government-established expectations, ministerial approval of institutional policies, annual reporting, and restrictions affecting governing Boards and senior administrators. If the government determines what constitutes neutrality, which matters are ideological, what falls within an institution's mandate, and whether an institution has complied, safeguards are necessary to prevent those powers from influencing legitimate institutional governance or academic decision-making. These safeguards should apply regardless of which political party forms government.

This concern also intersects with the Expert Panel's broader recommendations. Recommendation 8 calls for significantly greater institutional flexibility and autonomy, while Recommendation 9 recommends reducing Advanced Education reporting requirements and administrative burden. Recommendation 11, meanwhile, recommends that public post-secondary institutions adhere to institutional neutrality while protecting freedom of expression and intellectual diversity.¹¹ Implementation of Recommendation 11 should not undermine the autonomy and reduced regulatory burden contemplated elsewhere in the Panel's recommendations.

The issue is particularly important for governing Boards and student representatives serving on them. MRU's Board operates within statutory and institutional governance responsibilities, including oversight of University management and operations. The Board's bylaws also identify advocating on behalf of the University to the external community among its responsibilities, while requiring Board members to act honestly, in good faith, and in the best interests of the University.¹²

Elected student representatives who also serve on governing Boards must remain able to advocate independently through their student associations on matters such as tuition, post-secondary funding, student aid, housing, immigration, and student rights. A neutrality framework should therefore clearly distinguish between statements made on behalf of an institutional Board and advocacy undertaken by an individual in a separate representative capacity.

Protecting Human Rights, Reconciliation and Student Supports

Institutional neutrality must not prevent post-secondary institutions from fulfilling their responsibilities to students.

MRU has already established institutional commitments relating to equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility; freedom from discrimination and systemic racism; student wellbeing; reconciliation; Indigenization; and the integration of Indigenous knowledge. Vision 2030 commits the University to addressing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action and using the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a framework for Indigenization and decolonization.¹³ These commitments are further developed through Inii Awattoo: Indigenization and Decolonization Strategic Framework, 2026 Onward!! Many of these subjects can become politically contested. Political controversy alone, however, should not remove them from an institution's legitimate responsibilities.

This is particularly important when considering equity initiatives and specialized student supports. A provincial framework should distinguish between political advocacy and actions undertaken to meet legal obligations, address demonstrated barriers, support student success, or fulfill established institutional commitments.

Changes to equity-based supports should also be assessed for unintended consequences. Inconsistent approaches to supports available to different student populations could contribute to polarization or resentment, including toward Indigenous students accessing programs and services specifically designed to support Indigenous learners.

SAMRU REC therefore recommends that any institutional neutrality framework explicitly protects institutional responsibilities relating to human rights, accessibility, reconciliation, Indigenization, and evidence-based student supports.

Competitiveness and Broader Implications

Institutional neutrality is being considered within the broader work of the Expert Panel on Post-Secondary Institution Funding and Alberta's Competitiveness. The Panel's recommendations emphasize institutional flexibility, reduced regulatory burden, responsiveness to labour-market demand, and Alberta's post-secondary competitiveness!!

Implementation of institutional neutrality should therefore be assessed not only for its effects on institutional speech, but also for possible interactions with institutional planning, research, partnerships, recruitment, and workforce preparation.

These responsibilities are already interconnected within MRU's strategic direction. Vision 2030 commits the University to preparing graduates for the workforce and broader community, developing students' intercultural competence, supporting research and scholarship, and maintaining meaningful community partnerships.¹⁵!! Equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility and Indigenization and decolonization are also explicitly incorporated into MRU's institutional planning framework.!!

An overly broad definition of ideological activity could therefore create uncertainty about how institutions reconcile established academic and strategic commitments with new provincial neutrality requirements. Before implementation, Advanced Education should assess whether neutrality requirements could unintentionally affect institutional planning, research partnerships, recruitment, workforce preparation, or institutions' ability to respond to evolving academic and labour-market needs.

SAMRU REC recommends that the Ministry of Advanced Education:

- 1. Demonstrate the policy gap** by evaluating Alberta's existing free-expression requirements, including the policies institutions have implemented in response to those requirements, and identifying why additional institutional neutrality regulation is necessary.
- 2. Establish clear, consistent, and viewpoint-neutral definitions** for institutional neutrality, ideological and political activity, neutral learning environments, institutional mandate, pedagogical objectives, and other terminology governing compliance.
- 3. Explicitly protect academic freedom and legitimate academic decision-making**, including curriculum development, teaching, research, scholarship, academic assessment, and engagement with politically controversial subjects.
- 4. Protect institutional autonomy and independent governance** by ensuring ministerial approval, reporting, complaint, or enforcement mechanisms cannot be used to influence legitimate academic or institutional decisions.
- 5. Protect human rights, reconciliation, Indigenization, accessibility, and evidence-based student supports**, recognizing that political controversy surrounding these responsibilities does not make them inherently ideological or outside an institution's mandate.
- 6. Protect independent student advocacy**, particularly for elected student representatives who simultaneously serve on institutional governing Boards.

- 7. Establish transparent and politically independent implementation and accountability mechanisms,** including clear complaint processes, evidentiary standards, review or appeal mechanisms, consequences for non-compliance, and safeguards concerning institutional funding.
- 8. Assess broader impacts before implementation,** including administrative burden, research partnerships, recruitment, workforce preparation, and institutional competitiveness.
- 9. Continue meaningful consultation before implementation,** including engagement with students, elected student associations, institutions, faculty, Indigenous partners, and other affected communities on draft definitions and implementation requirements.

Conclusion:

SAMRU REC supports the Government of Alberta's objective of ensuring that students can express, challenge, and debate ideas freely within Alberta's post-secondary institutions. Academic freedom, freedom of expression, and intellectual diversity are essential to a strong post-secondary system.

Protecting these principles, however, requires more than establishing an expectation of neutrality. Any additional provincial framework must be evidence-based, clearly defined, proportionate, viewpoint-neutral, and accompanied by safeguards protecting academic freedom, institutional autonomy, human rights, reconciliation, student supports, and independent student advocacy.

Before proceeding, the Ministry of Advanced Education should demonstrate why Alberta's existing framework is insufficient and provide institutions and students with greater clarity regarding how neutrality would be defined, applied, and enforced. If institutional neutrality is intended to protect open inquiry and intellectual diversity, its implementation must preserve the ability of post-secondary institutions to remain places where difficult ideas can be examined, challenged, and debated freely.

References

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