

Chancellor's message regarding free speech and the campus climate

May 5, 2008, e-mail message from Chancellor Brian Levin-Stankevich to all UW-Eau Claire students and employees

Over the past two weeks, significant portions of our campus community have been discussing an essay published in the Flipside. The essay contains offensive language and demeaning themes that objectify women, and shows a disregard for the seriousness of crimes of violence against women. I share concerns that this piece is having a negative effect on campus climate.

The controversy raises two primary issues: the right to free speech and our goal of creating a campus climate of respect and inclusivity. The former is easier to address. Freedom of speech is a fundamental value if we profess to provide an education that challenges ourselves to confront the unknown, the uncomfortable, and even that which we individually deem intolerable.

Achieving a campus climate conducive to learning and in which differences may be expressed freely and respectfully is a more complex challenge. It requires that we exercise our rights responsibly. It requires self-restraint. Although it is legal to express obnoxious opinions, it is not necessarily responsible to do so, particularly when there is little academic, intellectual, or social merit to the opinions. Additionally, expressions that may raise legitimate concerns about safety must and will be addressed on an individual basis, and we have procedures to do so.

To succeed as a campus community, we must balance our rights and responsibilities. Those of us who disagree with the content of the Flipside essay must recall that the First Amendment demands broad protection for speech. Just because we as a university community allow free speech does not mean we condone the ideas that the speech contains. On the other hand, those who support the publication must not forget that we live in a community that does not value hate and in which respect should inform discourse. That is the challenge of rights, and that is the mandate of responsibility.

Chancellor Brian Levin-Stankevich