

# *University Debate and Freedom of Speech*

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*An Open Statement to the Harvard Community  
November 14, 1991*

**D**URING the past few days, there have been reports of controversial incidents related to the issue of sexual orientation. I would like to state as clearly as possible my own views on the broad range of concerns raised by these incidents:

First, actions that are intimidating and are directed at specific individuals are repugnant and intolerable. The recent incident (as reported in the *Crimson*) involving the defacement of the door of a student's room with a homophobic epithet – or similar vandalism or attacks directed at any member of the University – are not only a violation of University regulations; they are cowardly and contemptible.

Second, actions that are clearly in the realm of freedom of expression and speech, that offer opinions or statements in a more general way, must be protected, even if they are offensive to some members of the community. If we find certain statements offensive, then we can respond in ways that are appropriate to a

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university. Some people may simply choose to ignore such views. Others may wish to debate them, offer counter-opinions, or reply with parody, wit, or ridicule. To attempt to censor such speech, however, would be totally inappropriate.

Finally, debate on controversial issues is inevitable and essential. I would hope, however, that all members of the community will continue to bear in mind the fundamental purposes of the University: that we are here to evaluate ideas and ask new questions, but that our basic goal should be to do so in a way that actually advances the cause of learning, of new knowledge, and of understanding.

It is not difficult to caricature, parody, or in a general way disparage the views of others. Indeed, sometimes – as brilliant satirists have shown us – this can be very healthy, even necessary, and can sharpen our vision of what is true. There is no question of our remaining open to a variety of forms of expression and debate. At the same time, we are also likely to serve one another best if we remember that – as members of a single university community – civil discourse, thoughtful arguments based on informed views, genuine scholarship, and careful as well as imaginative expression are at the very heart of our work as students, teachers, scholars, and staff members.

It will not always be obvious how to reconcile the twin goals of guarding genuinely free expression while also attempting to build a community free of intimidation and harassment, based on a respect for individuals as well as a desire to learn from others. We will always have the problem of resolving difficult cases that are ambiguous or unclear.

There is no simple solution to these dilemmas or to the tensions inherent in them. But a university by its nature should be prepared to address such complexity, to live with it, and to deal with it in ways that are constructive and humane. That will happen only if individuals and groups who disagree with one another are willing to discuss their differences candidly in the hope of achiev-

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ing deeper mutual understanding and a shared sense of being members of a university that has powerful common values and goals.