

School of Social Work Community:

Please see the below statement that resulted from student advocacy and student, faculty, and staff collaboration. It will be shared with a range of stakeholders.

Stephanie

Social work is a profession that requires its practitioners to advocate for change, to reshape an unjust society for the welfare of all, and to disrupt the patterns of injustice that play out generation after generation. Our profession's code of ethics, by which social work students, faculty, and practitioners all agree to abide, demands many things of us, including that we "advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice." Social workers must halt the processes of injustice, speak against those who perpetuate it, and organize to produce a just future.

UW faculty, staff, and students must abide by the rules of the university, yet social work faculty and students must also abide by our profession's code of ethics. As such, we have grave concerns about the "Commitment to Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression" as enacted by the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents this fall with resolution 10952. We believe that the language used by the Regents may put the university rules at odds with our profession's ethics.

Social workers, in the pursuit of a just society, must engage in the very sort of disruption that the Regents aim to vanquish from our university. The language used by the Regents to target students is as ambiguous as it is unforgiving, and it may operate to systematically silence students. The policy draws an implicit distinction between established speech that has a right to be heard, and disruptive speech. This distinction - premised on the legal falsehood that the established voice has a right to be heard - makes clear that the Board of Regents is crafting a tool that can be used to broadly silence dissent. This policy compels each campus of the University of Wisconsin to suspend and expel students who are "disrupt[ive] of the expressive rights of others" and participate in "protests and demonstrations that materially and substantially disrupt the rights of others to engage in or listen to expressive activity." The severity of the punishment, combined with broad and equivocal criteria for discipline, is concerning.

Effective advocacy requires people to organize and disrupt just as readily as it demands that they contact their representatives. The School of Social Work supports students who engage in social justice work, whether it takes the form of rebutting or interrupting oppressive speech from a colleague or it takes the form of organized counter-protest against an invited hate speaker. The need for disruptive voices is greater now more than ever. The recent Campus Climate Survey demonstrates that many of our students experience hostile, harassing, or intimidating behavior directed at them on campus: this includes 33% of trans/non-binary students, 21% of LGBTQ students, 19% of students of color, and 28% of students with disabilities. As a result, these groups of students report feeling that they don't belong on campus, a clear sign that we need to hear more voices across our campus, not fewer.

The UW-Madison School of Social Work faculty, staff, and students join the UW-Madison Academic Staff Assembly – see Document #665A, February 12, 2018 – in a call for the Board of Regents to either rescind resolution 10952 or to modify it so as to restore discretion to the administration of each campus. At the same time, we urge the Chancellor and Dean of Students to implement this and other policies in a way that ensures that our campus continues to support and value the role of student dissent and protest, as no significant social change has happened in our society without it.

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