

Keeping the Flame Alive: An Alumni Action Plan for Campus Free Expression

Every university begins with a spark; the conviction that truth *can* be discovered.

That spark, once kindled, illuminates everything that follows; from the lecture hall to the laboratory to the stage. But the flame is fragile. It flickers whenever fear replaces curiosity, or when orthodoxy demands silence instead of debate.

As alumni, you are the natural torchbearers of that flame. You have felt its warmth, and it has guided your paths long after commencement. Your task now is to ensure that the flame you inherited continues to burn for all those who follow.

So, here are **10 meaningful ways** to keep that flame alive!

1. Demand that your alma mater stays true to its mission.

Universities exist for a simple but vital purpose: the pursuit of truth. That mission thrives only when students and faculty can speak openly, ask hard questions, and explore new ideas without fear. In 2014, the University of Chicago reaffirmed this commitment with the “Chicago Principles,” a landmark to protect free expression on campus. More than a hundred universities have since [embraced](#) these principles, in some shape or another. If your alma mater hasn’t, you can help change that. Reach out to your president, provost, or board of trustees and urge adoption.

Helpful Resources

- [Chicago Statement Endorsement Letter](#)
- [The Chicago Statement \(University of Chicago Report\)](#)
- [Adopting the Chicago Statement Toolkit](#)
- [Model Freedom of Expression Resolution](#)

2. Prevent your alma mater from playing favorites in the marketplace of ideas.

When a university takes an official stance on a political or moral issue, it tilts the playing field, and makes it harder for dissenting voices to feel safe speaking up. That’s why you should urge your alma mater to adopt a policy of institutional neutrality, modeled on the University of Chicago’s 1967 Kalven Report. The principle is simple: a university’s role is to foster discussion, not dictate outcomes or enforce orthodoxy. A neutral university is a stronger university; one where every member of the community can think, speak, and question freely.

Helpful Resources

- [Institutional Neutrality Endorsement Letter](#)
- [The Kalven Report](#)
- [Adopting Institutional Neutrality Toolkit](#)
- [FAQ: Institutional Neutrality](#)



3. Make sure your alma mater protects speech in reality, not just in rhetoric.

A promise to uphold free speech means little if a school's own rules contradict it. Many universities still maintain vague or overly broad policies on “harassment,” “bias,” or “civility” — policies that can easily be misused to punish protected speech. [FIRE's Spotlight Database](#) lets you see exactly how your alma mater measures up. Use it to identify problem areas, raise concerns publicly, and contact university leaders. You can also support student and faculty reform efforts to promote clearer, fairer policies. When schools update their rules to match their values, free expression becomes more than a slogan; it becomes standard practice.

Helpful Resources

- [Speech Code Information Request Form](#)
- [Model Speech Policies for College Campus](#)
- [Model Code of Student Conduct](#)
- [Model Policy for Allocating Student Fees](#)

4. Encourage your alma mater to teach free speech from day one.

The value of free expression isn't something students should have to figure out on their own; it should be part of their education *from the beginning*. That's why universities like Purdue and the University of Chicago now include free expression as a key part of first-year orientation. These programs help new students understand their rights, their responsibilities, and the purpose of an open, curious campus. If your alma mater doesn't offer this, encourage it to start. Volunteer to help, or support the effort financially. When students learn the value of free speech early, they're far more likely to defend it throughout their lives.

Helpful Resources

- [FIRE's Guide to First-Year Orientation and Thought Reform on Campus](#)
- [Video Lessons for Freshman Orientation & First-Year Experience Programming](#)
- [FAQ: Adopting Free Speech Lessons for Orientation & First-Year Experience Programming](#)

5. Create spaces where disagreement is welcomed and reason prevails.

Civil discourse is essential to a thriving university. Alumni can play a powerful role in strengthening campus culture by supporting debates, lectures, and speaker events that show what respectful disagreement looks like in practice. Partner with student groups and faculty who are open to bringing a wide range of viewpoints to campus. When students see people debate big ideas passionately but without hostility, they realize that real learning happens through intellectual friction, not fear.

Helpful Resources

- [FIRE's Speaker Bureau](#)
- [Three Steps to Civil Discourse](#)
- [Cognitive Behavioral Theory for Civil Discourse](#)



6. Defend student journalism, even when it's inconvenient.

A free press is essential to a free university. But many student newspapers struggle; whether from tight budgets, administrative pressure, or confusing rules about what they can publish. Alumni can help safeguard their independence. You can donate directly to student newsrooms, push your alma mater to provide transparent and fair funding, or offer guidance to aspiring student journalists. Supporting campus media helps protect their independence and strengthens the university as a whole. Student journalism is democracy's training ground. It deserves steady hands defending it.

Helpful Resources

- [Under Pressure: The Warning Signs of Student Press Censorship](#)
- [Free PRESSED: How Administrative Censorship is Squeezing Student Newsrooms](#)
- [Can I Publish This?](#)

7. Use your voice to remind your alma mater what freedom feels like.

Alumni voices matter, often more than you realize. Use yours. Write letters, essays, or op-eds for your campus newspaper or for local and national outlets explaining why free expression is essential. Speak up for reform and accountability. Let today's students and faculty know they're not standing alone. You can also share the moments from your own education that shaped you: the debate that challenged your assumptions, the professor who pushed you to think differently, the uncomfortable conversation that led to real insight. Stories like these remind people what open inquiry makes possible. Personal testimony turns principle into memory; and memory into movement.

Helpful Resources

- [How to Place an Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor in Your Student Newspaper](#)
- [How To Get Your Op-Ed Placed In A Professional Publication](#)

8. Tie your donations to real commitments to free expression.

Universities rely on alumni donations but too often, those gifts come with no expectations. You can change that. Direct your support to programs that strengthen open debate, fund independent student journalism, or encourage real viewpoint diversity. Make your priorities clear: you won't bankroll censorship. When donors give with purpose, institutions pay attention. Money guided by conscience can help steer a university toward its highest ideals.

Helpful Resources

- [Tribute Gifts](#)
- [Stop Supporting Universities That Don't Support Free Speech](#)
- [Let your free speech-failing alma mater know: 'I put my money where my mouth is'](#)

9. Run for your alumni board and make freedom a priority.

Alumni boards play a real role in shaping a university's direction. They influence policy, funding priorities, and the values a school chooses to emphasize. Serving on one gives you both a voice and a vote in your alma mater's future. If you run, make your platform clear: support transparency, institutional neutrality, and a strong commitment to free inquiry. Even if you don't win the seat, you still help elevate free expression as a legitimate, visible priority for alumni. Freedom lasts when people inside the institution speak up for it — and alumni are uniquely positioned to do exactly that.

10. Start a free speech alumni coalition.

Real change is easier when you're not working alone. A free speech-focused alumni coalition can amplify your voice and give reform efforts structure and stability. These groups can advocate for stronger policies, support students and faculty when controversies arise, host events that model civil discourse, and keep pressure on administrators to uphold their commitments.

Helpful Resources

- [Starting an Alumni Group](#)
- [Alumni Group Directory](#)

Pass the Flame Forward

A university's flame does not survive by accident. It survives because people choose to protect it; to question boldly, to speak honestly, and to preserve the conditions that allow truth to be pursued. As an alum, you stand in the long line of those who kept that flame alive. Now it's your turn to carry it forward.

If you take even one of these steps, you help ensure that curiosity, courage, and open inquiry continue to light the way for future generations.

Let's Get to Work

Book a 30 minute meeting with FIRE's Alumni Outreach Team [here!](#) We'd love to hear from you and discuss how we can build something meaningful together.

The flame is yours now. Pick it up — and pass it on.

