

ON FREE SPEECH

Freedom of expression, scrutiny of public officials and open government are bedrock principles of a democracy and of institutions of higher learning. These values are central to our mission at the Missouri School of Journalism.

So, we, the undersigned faculty members, want to express our disappointment in a series of actions by University of Missouri System President and MU Chancellor Mun Choi that — intentionally or not — contradict the "Missouri Method" for which our school is justifiably famous. His move to block students and others from his Twitter account is the latest of these.

These actions include discouraging dissent — publicly and in direct private communications from the chancellor to faculty members — and singling out two of our colleagues in an interview with local media.

As the university confronts unprecedented financial challenges, and the likelihood of further layoffs and belt-tightening, an implied intolerance of dissent looms as a very real threat. Already, a few colleagues and students have confided that they fear that speaking out will put their jobs or scholarships at risk. A number of our colleagues work in our community newsrooms, which cover the university. Some may have withheld signatures to avoid the perception of a conflict of interest.

That is why we feel it is important for us to speak out about the potential for a chilling effect on the campus and on the professional community news outlets staffed by MU faculty and students. If President Choi's actions have not had that effect so far, it's only due to the professional standards of the largely untenured School of Journalism faculty and the courage of their students in upholding those standards — and the First Amendment.

President Choi reversed his decision to block students from his Twitter account under threat of a lawsuit. Yet it should not take eruptions of public outrage to force his compliance with the values of free speech and public openness that are at the heart of what we stand for — as a School of Journalism, as a public institution of higher learning and as inheritors of a great democratic tradition.

Amidst the global crisis of the pandemic, leadership of the campus that is home to the world's first school of journalism should be modelling transparency.

Twitter is not known as a forum for reasoned and temperate discussion but leaders who choose to use it as a means of communication should not curb debate. Rather, they should seize the opportunity to create a teaching moment by modeling responsive governance, open communication and empathy with students whose lives and routines have been profoundly disrupted.

More than 100 years ago, Walter Williams, the founding dean of the Missouri School of Journalism — and future president of this university — urged members of our profession to be “stoutly independent, unmoved by pride of opinion or greed of power, constructive, tolerant but never careless, self-controlled, patient, always respectful...” These words should be reflected in action, and we urge the administration to be more transparent and open in the information it shares with the campus and wider community during the coronavirus crisis. If we are all in this together — and we are — we all must have a voice in the process. And we all must listen to one another.

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