

Testimony in Support of the KIRK Act

Members of the Legislature, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the KIRK Act.

My name is Theo Grabill, and I am a senior at the University of Kansas, and President of the KU Chapter of Turning Point USA.

I appear before you to raise serious concerns about the state of free speech and civil discourse at the University of Kansas, a publicly funded institution entrusted with educating students of all backgrounds and viewpoints.

The University of Kansas currently holds a free-speech score of **55.7 out of 100**, receiving an **overall grade of F**. Administrative support for free expression also receives an **F**, and political tolerance among students receives an **F**. These scores should concern every taxpayer and policymaker in this state.

What makes this situation more troubling is that while the **national average free-speech score is trending upward**, KU is **trending downward**. The university has also **failed to adopt institutional neutrality**, leaving students without assurance that the institution itself will refrain from taking ideological sides or allowing certain viewpoints to be suppressed.

The data reflects a campus climate defined by fear and silence rather than open inquiry:

- **41% of KU students report self-censoring at least once or twice per month, ranking the university 254th out of 257 institutions nationwide.**
- **73% of students believe shouting down a speaker to prevent them from speaking is acceptable in some cases.**
- **44% believe violence to stop someone from speaking is acceptable in some circumstances, ranking last in the nation.**

When nearly half of students believe violence is an acceptable response to speech, that is not simply a cultural issue - it is an institutional failure. Shutting down free speech and civil discourse has led, and will continue to lead, to universities becoming more hostile, coercive, and ultimately less civilized places of learning.

These statistics are not abstract. They are reflected in real student experiences.

One student lived in university dorm housing. On the day of Charlie Kirk's assassination, she was in her dorm room, visibly upset. Her roommate entered the room and told her that the assassin had done "God's work." She later placed a small sign on the outside of her

door inviting others to write their favorite Bible verse. The next morning, she found the sign erased and replaced with political slogans, including “Justice for George Floyd,” “Free Palestine,” and “F*** ICE.”

A week later, she returned to her dorm to find that her roommate had hung a flag in their shared living space stating, “F*** Trump and f*** you for voting for him.” She did not retaliate. She respectfully took the flag down, folded it, and sent her roommate a polite message explaining that because the living room was a shared space, political messaging should remain in private rooms.

That same evening, she overheard her roommate making threats against her while on the phone with someone else. Fearing for her safety, she felt she had no choice but to move out of university housing.

This is not an isolated story. It is the predictable outcome of a campus environment where civil discourse has been replaced by ideological activism - often funded by taxpayer dollars. Conservative and religious students increasingly fear for their personal safety, their academic standing, and their ability to participate fully in campus life.

Our organization, like countless other student groups, has placed flyers around campus in accordance with university policy. Those flyers are routinely torn down - sometimes by students, and in some cases by faculty members - solely because of disagreement with our viewpoints. In the comment sections of papers we have published, we have received responses such as, “We don’t debate fascists because it normalizes fascism.”

When faculty members treat disagreement as something to be *silenced* rather than *engaged*, they teach students that suppression - not debate - is the proper response to political disagreement. That lesson has *consequences*.

Another student reported that a professor required an entire class to attend a political protest on campus and justified it by assigning a graded project based on what students observed. Compelled political participation is not education; it is coercion.

Despite claims that universities can regulate themselves, KU’s own data demonstrates otherwise. A proposal, by a friend of mine, to promote self-regulating free speech in student senate was rejected overwhelmingly, by a 50–1 vote. No formal complaints were filed regarding several of these incidents - not because they did not occur, but because students reasonably fear retaliation or believe that reporting will lead nowhere. When administrators receive failing grades for supporting free expression, students learn quickly that silence is safer than speaking.

This is not a healthy academic environment. It is one in which fear, intimidation, and coercion replace open inquiry and debate. When universities abandon civil discourse, political disagreement stops being intellectual and begins to carry personal and even physical risk.

We have also reached out to organizations on campus that publicly claim to promote bipartisanship or free speech, including the Dole Institute of Politics and Panhellenic leadership. These organizations have declined to join efforts to promote viewpoint neutrality or free expression, despite their stated missions.

Students are increasingly told they are not to be debated because doing so “normalizes fascism.” Being labeled a fascist or neo-Nazi is used as a justification to silence speech rather than confront ideas. Because voices have been silenced, this behavior has been normalized.

The result is a campus culture in which students are treated as morally illegitimate - or even subhuman - based on their political beliefs.

The only way out of this cycle is a renewed commitment to civil discourse and free expression. Until those principles are actively protected and enforced, conditions will continue to worsen.

This is why legislative action is necessary. Public universities are not neutral arbiters when they allow intimidation, ideological enforcement, and coercion to replace open debate. The KIRK Act does not privilege one viewpoint over another. It works towards ensuring that all students are given the ability to speak freely without the fear of being harassed, failing classes, or even physically assaulted.

Legislative oversight is not interference - it is accountability. And accountability is long overdue.