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Panel discussed universities' responsibilities with Freedom of Expression

By Paul Suellentrop

Public universities play an essential role in freedom of expression and should act as a promoter and protector, especially during contentious times that produce challenging and complex discussions.

On Wednesday, Wichita State University presented “Speaking Freely on Freedom of Expression,” a virtual panel discussion that emphasized that point, among many others.

[Watch the panel discussion here.](#)

Dr. Lee Pelton, a Wichita State alumnus who has been president of Emerson College in Boston the past 10 years, moderated the panel.

Tyson Langhofer, a 1996 graduate of Wichita State; Christine Hughes, former vice president and general counsel of Emerson College; and Neal Allen, chair of Wichita State’s department of political science, joined Pelton as panelists.

“At Wichita State, we encourage debate and civil discourse,” said Dr. Rick Muma, interim president of Wichita State. “We firmly believe that the free expression of diverse ideas helps our institution flourish and, most importantly, it helps our students develop into well-rounded and thoughtful global citizens.”

- Langhofer, senior Counsel and director, Center for Academic Freedom with Alliance Defending Freedom, said speech deserves broad protections and is protected by the Supreme Court for vital reasons. The way to combat bad information, he said, is with good information. “We are prone to censor speech we disagree with,” he said. “You can look at hundreds of examples, over time, to show that truth does, in general, win out. Frankly, censorship is counterproductive.”
- Allen encourages universities to promote a realistic understanding of what they can and cannot regulate when it comes to controversial topics. “I don’t think we have any kind of special power to remove people from debate and to protect them from communication that might make them

uncomfortable,” he said. “As somebody that teaches about law and civil liberties the only way I can actually teach is to talk about things that are, by their nature, objectionable to some. Politics is not about what we all agree on. It's about what we disagree on and how to deal with it.”

- Hughes explained that while the First Amendment offers protections from the government limiting speech, it does not protect a speaker from disagreement. The immediacy of social media adds to the challenges of this discussion. “I think people understand that even if they have a First Amendment right to say something, they are accountable for the reactions that they generate,” she said. “I think that's one thing, that for the students to understand that at some point if they excite a social media firestorm that doesn't rise to the level of people being threatened with violence that they own the consequences of their speech.”