

Statement regarding Scholarly Discourse at UMKC

This Statement was authored collaboratively in the Spring Semester of 2018 by members of the UMKC faculty and staff from departments, offices, and units across UMKC who participated in a series of Faculty Diversity Dialogues at the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and the Health Sciences Building, sponsored by FaCET and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion: Drew Bergerson (lead author/discussion leader), Stephen Dilks (Diversity Dialogues facilitator), Hali Fieldman, Shannon Jackson, Jacob B. Marszalek, Sarah Beth Mundy, Johanna Nilsson, Tiffani Riggers-Piehl, Dan Weddle. This document will be submitted for consideration to the Faculty Senate and revised again in light of their feedback. The Faculty Senate will place it appropriately as a Faculty Governance document.

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Introduction

Scholarly discourse stands at the heart of UMKC's mission as a research and teaching university. It is the foundational standard against which academic institutions evaluate the quality of new, original works of discovery, creativity, and research, as well as the quality of teaching informed by the latest research. It stands at the core of how we advise and mentor our students, and how we use our expertise and specialized knowledge to serve communities beyond UMKC. This document is designed as a tool for members of our community to thoughtfully consider how best to frame and engage in scholarly discourse.

Part I. The Purpose of this Statement

A High Standard

Scholarly discourse sets a very high standard for communication. Scholars engage sincerely in dialogue with other scholars in the pursuit of answers to profound and important questions. Scholarly discourse requires scholars to base their opinions on evidence, collected according to the most stringent methods. In addition to adhering to these current best practices with discipline-specific diligence, scholarly discourse also requires scholars to present their findings with equally demanding rules and expectations for professional conduct. Moreover, scholars at research universities such as UMKC teach those best practices to a new generation of scholars and model them for our community at large.

The Challenge

Unfortunately, the normative value of expertise and fact-based analysis is being steadily undermined in the contemporary public sphere. It is no longer self-evident that our audiences, even those in the lecture halls, understand the underlying practices which provide scholarly discourse with claims to validity and which undergird its value for a civil society and a democratic form of government. Our audiences are thus susceptible to efforts to hijack the public discourses of our universities in order to legitimize pseudo-science, to disseminate propaganda, and to dignify demonstrably inaccurate assertions that purport to represent legitimate positions in academic analysis, debate, enquiry, and review. Our challenge as scholars is, then, to *define the parameters and protocols associated with scholarly discourse to ensure that the pursuit of validity and truth are conducted in ways that are civil, democratic, fact-based, and collegial.*

The Opportunity

We alone cannot remedy this situation on all university campuses, but it is necessary for the faculty of UMKC to take the lead in doing so at our institution. More to the point, it is overdue for the faculty of a research institution to lay out a set of working definitions for what constitutes scholarly discourse so that we can communicate these definitions transparently and consistently to students, colleagues, and other stakeholders in our community.

Scope of this Document

The situation that confronts us is potentially related to the freedom of expression guaranteed by the United States Constitution, but that is beyond the scope of these recommendations. Whereas UMKC is committed ethically and legally to securing free expression on campus (MO [SB93](#) and [UMKC Policy](#)) and defending the academic freedom of its faculty ([CRR 310.010](#)) and students, the purpose of this document is to outline a set of considerations designed to inform how we express ourselves as scholars and how we frame scholarly presentations and publications in the UMKC community.

Scholarly discourse has special characteristics that make it a unique form of expression. In contrast to open forums where the University has explicit policies about the free expression of ideas (MO [SB93](#) and [UMKC Policy](#)), the forms of expression to which this document refers take place inside our academic classrooms and buildings as well as inside the pages of academic publications and on university-owned electronic devices. These are either closed forums, such as peer-reviewed journals, official courses, or invited speakers; or limited open forums, such as when we invite citizens onto campus from our community to speak from their experience

or to share their creative work, or when we share our scholarly or creative work with communities other than our students.

Some contexts in which this document may apply therefore include: classroom instruction, student mentoring, invited speakers (incl. convocation), consultants and critics, workshops or seminars, publications, and other situations where a member of our community is representing our institution as a scholar or where we are responsible for setting up a scholarly presentation. In such situations, scholarly discourse must meet the specific standards consistent with our peer institutions of higher learning.

Application of this Document

Like many such documents in our peer-governed profession, this one is intended not as a strict set of legal criteria but as a general reference manual for best practices. We recommend that members of our community at all stages in their scholarly careers should *consider these principles in advance* of organizing or participating in situations of scholarly discourse in order to ensure that the conversations generated at our institution are of academic quality. Novice scholars—whether they are students, members of the faculty exploring interdisciplinary terrain, members of the public, or anyone working beyond their expertise—may not have the training to adhere to all of the best practices of scholarly discourse in this new field, but they are still expected to do so to the best of their abilities and with good intent.

In Case of Conflict

No list of best practices can prevent conflicts from arising. If they do, we recommend engaging all relevant representatives of the impacted University stakeholders and discussing the matter *openly using the tools of scholarly discourse*. As an institution of higher learning committed to creating a learning environment for all its members, special care should be taken to ensure that unintentional mistakes or honest disagreements about the application of these best practices are treated as learning opportunities. While rigorous standards of scholarly discourse are expected, a healthy university climate depends on the creation of an environment in which *all* participants are given a reasonable chance for correction and improvement.

Part II. Some Propositions regarding Best Practices

This document proposes a general definition together with six component subcategories – scholarly qualifications, internal validity, external responsibility, scholarly rhetoric, scholarly context, and intersubjective validation. Taken together, these definitions constitute a working set of best practices for scholarly discourse. These descriptions are not exhaustive but suggestive. Like all scholarly propositions, it is expected that they will evolve and improve in response to feedback, criticism,

and experience. Like all definitions, they give rise to contradictions and ambiguous cases that will require careful consideration to unravel. As ours is an institution of higher learning, it is expected that developing an institutional culture that supports these best practices will be a mutual learning process not only for students but also for faculty, staff, administrators, and other stakeholders in our communities.

General Definition

Scholarly discourse refers to performative-representational practices in intersubjective academic situations that generate knowledge and/or shape understandings which foster a climate of critical dialogue, including the constructive, responsible effort to unpack and impart knowledge.

Scholarly Qualifications

Scholarly discourse typically involves people who are qualified to speak on the topic/s, though feedback and criticism includes other members of the public. The best practices for qualification vary by discipline, but general measures include:

1. an advanced degree in relevant or closely related field/s; or
2. the equivalent years of relevant work or life experience; or
3. the respect of (other) scholars as a reliable source for insight into the phenomenon; or
4. active enrollment in a degree program to develop competencies in a relevant or closely related field/s.

When UMKC students engage in scholarly discourse, they do so under the supervision of their teachers or mentors. In the spirit of the free exchange of ideas, it behooves scholars to encourage the participation in scholarly discourse of people who offer contrary interpretations, even if these speakers do not have professional training or credentials (see criteria 1. above). We should create forums that include presentations by novice scholars, marginalized groups, non-professional academics, independent scholars, the authors of creative works, people who speak from their life or work experiences, and controversial figures. However, non-professionals are still expected to be qualified to speak on the topics in other ways (see criteria 2. and 3. above). Event organizers should always create contexts in which scholarly discourse will thrive (see Scholarly Contexts below); but doing so is particularly incumbent when speakers lack professional training or credentials as academics.

Internal Validity

Scholarly discourse is based on research that is conducted with integrity. The best practices for internal validity vary by discipline, but they typically require that scholars:

1. employ a sufficient amount of appropriate evidence without ignoring available evidence;
2. apply their method/s to all of the available evidence systematically, consistently, and responsibly;
3. report the evidence accurately, without obfuscation, and completely, including outliers;
4. provide proper, accurate references to encourage verification and validation by other scholars; and
5. carefully, constructively, and reflexively (i.e. reflective and recursively self-improving) consider weaknesses in their research process, bias in their interpretations, and limitations of their conclusions in light of their evidence and methods.

Scholarship should demonstrate logical fit among the various aspects of its process – questions, theories, methods, evidence, and conclusions – such that each makes sense in light of the others. Scholarly discourse should make this fit transparent.

External Responsibility

Scholarly discourse has social utility: i.e., it involves asking questions, conducting research, and drawing conclusions that advance interests and needs beyond those of the individual scholar.

The best practices of external responsibility vary by discipline, but all scholars are required to conduct their research ethically. Depending on the discipline in which the research is being conducted, scholars may be expected to conduct their research according to the requirements of an Institutional Review Board or other research-ethics boards.

All scholars are expected to conduct their research with integrity (as defined above), according to the law, according to the best practices for research ethics in their field/s, and with careful consideration for the impact of their scholarship on all relevant stakeholders.

Scholarly Rhetoric

Scholarly discourse should be designed to inform. Scholars should

1. use logical, argumentative prose to draw reasonable conclusions;
2. avoid formulations that are unnecessarily inflammatory or intentionally designed to obfuscate;
3. always be professional, civil, collegial, and respectful;
4. challenge others for their ideas, not based on who they are (“ad hominem” or “ad feminam” attacks).

Scholarly Context

The quality of scholarly discourse is deeply influenced by spatial and temporal arrangements as well as cultural and social situations. The members of our community responsible for organizing venues for scholarly discourse should make the effort to *consider carefully and consciously how to arrange them in advance* such that they encourage participation and best practices.

Scholarly contexts should never intentionally threaten or unnecessarily risk the safety of their audience or participants. Scholars cannot guarantee the comfort of their audience with the ideas expressed; but scholars should provide advance notice about the general content of their discourse – for instance, a course description or a lecture blurb – to allow their audience to make informed decisions as to whether they wish to join that particular scholarly situation as participant or audience.

Insofar as a free exchange of ideas would ideally include the voices of novice scholars, marginalized groups, non-professional academics, independent scholars, the authors of creative works, people who speak from their life or work experiences, controversial figures, and people who offer contrary interpretations, a properly designed scholarly context can go far to facilitate their inclusion: for instance, by framing their presentations as a panel discussion, a public debate, a classroom assignment, an oral-history project, ethnographic participant-observation, a literary criticism, an art critique, or by providing additional resources for deeper critical inspection.

Convocation and similar speakers present a particularly delicate challenge. They are traditionally given wide latitude in the content of their speeches, and yet the ritual context of Convocation is rather limited in terms of opportunities for many aspects of scholarly discourse, such as critical engagement with the speakers' ideas. For this reason, it is particularly incumbent on the hosts of such events to ensure that speakers will meet the high standards of scholarly discourse befitting an institution of higher learning.

As an institution committed to creating a learning environment, the members of our UMKC community are responsible for mutually instructing each other on these best practices, providing each other with constructive feedback, and framing their own contributions to scholarly discourse in a way that encourages everyone to abide by its best practices and learn from their mistakes.

Intersubjective Validation

Scholars propose interpretations that are new in some significant way. They draw conclusions in a variety of ways: they may express or represent experiences, analyze or interpret evidence, suggest outcomes, or derive general principles, depending on the best practices of their disciplines. But in all cases, scholars make truth claims on the basis of:

1. A careful investigation of the evidence;
2. A deep, constructive engagement with the relevant, established scholarly communities concerned with the topic/s; and
3. A deep, constructive, reflexive (i.e. reflective and recursively self-improving) engagement with their own scholarly process.

Scholars never speak in isolation; scholarly discourse always requires unpacking by others. Scholars therefore seek out opportunities to validate their propositions intersubjectively. Scholars harken to and take seriously the constructive criticism of peer reviewers, readers, critics, commentators, and members of the stakeholder communities, audiences, and the public at large. Scholars listen attentively to and welcome public discussion as to the validity of its questions, theories, methods, and conclusions. By the same token, scholars providing feedback are expected to abide by the same high standards of scholarly discourse as other scholars.

Part III. Appendixes

Some other statements for comparison:

- From the AAUP: https://onefacultyoneresistance.org/featured-campaigns/freespeech/?link_id=2&can_id=59ab7b7b268faaa0d0f853647628d125&source=email-free-speech-on-campus-take-action&email_referrer=email_335749_subject_412590&email_subject=free-speech-on-campus-take-action
- Nadirah Farah Foley, a sociologist of education working toward her doctorate at Harvard: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/opinion-foley-campus-free-speech_us_5a9dadaee4b0a0ba4ad6efb9
- From the University of Chicago: http://www.intellectualltakeout.org/sites/ito/files/acceptance_letter.jpg
- From the University of Michigan: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mm/> and <https://publicaffairs.vpcomm.umich.edu/key-issues/freedom-of-speech-and-artistic-expression/>
- From Michigan State University: <https://msu.edu/freespeech/statements/>