



**PennState**

*This message was shared with all faculty and staff via an email on Sept. 4 from Tracy Langkilde, interim executive vice president and provost, and Jennifer Wilkes, vice president for Human Resources and chief Human Resources officer*

## **Guidelines Regarding Political Activity by Penn State University Employees**

Penn State fully supports the fundamental right of free speech, including the constitutional right of faculty and staff to engage in political viewpoints and ideas. We understand that navigating the complexities of University policies can be challenging, especially in a dynamic academic environment. As employees of a state-related institution, faculty and staff have a responsibility when exercising these rights to make it clear that their opinions are their own and that they do not speak for the University.

This document is intended to help Penn State faculty and staff become familiar with their rights and responsibilities while engaging in activities related to political matters and the upcoming elections. We encourage our faculty and staff to participate in our democracy while being mindful of Penn State's status as a public institution. Below is a brief summary of Penn State's policies as well as some suggested best practices to implement as you engage in the political process.

### **Expression of Political Views Outside the Employment Context**

Penn State's policy on Academic Freedom ([AC64](#)) for faculty states that faculty are both citizens and "representatives of this University," and when "the faculty member speaks or writes as a citizen, the faculty member shall be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but the special position in the community held by the faculty member imposes special obligations."

This means faculty members should feel free, for example, to campaign for political candidates as a private citizen and not as a representative of Penn State, while always being aware that "the public may judge the profession and institution by their utterances."

Under the Political Campaign Activities policy ([AD92](#)), University employees and representatives are free to make political statements in their personal capacity as private citizens. However, if an employee's political statements or activities might be perceived as representing the University, the employee should clarify that these statements and activities are their own and not made on behalf of the University. This can be done through an appropriate disclaimer. Policy AD92 does not restrict an employee's ability, in their personal capacity and on their own time, to join any political party, make personal contributions to a political candidate or organization, or participate in a political campaign.

### **Restriction on Representing University's Position on Legislative, Political, or Other Issues**

The Political Campaign Activities policy ([AD92](#)) states: "...employees and representatives, when acting in

their official capacities for the University, may not, directly or indirectly, participate in, or intervene in, any political campaign on behalf of, or in opposition to, any candidate for elective public office. This includes campaigns at the federal, state, and local level.”

For example, employees in their official capacity or as a representative of the University, may not contribute to political campaigns; make public statements that support or oppose a candidate for public office; distribute statements prepared by others that support or oppose a candidate for public office; nor allow candidates to use University resources.

Activities related to voter education and registration are permitted but must be performed in a nonpartisan manner if representing the University. Activities also may not support or oppose specific candidates running for public office. Additionally, the policy is not intended “...to limit non-partisan courses, coursework, curricular activities and other assignments designed to foster civic engagement, educate students, or enhance public understanding of the political election process.”

In their capacity as citizens, employees may express their views on any matter of public interest. If a statement could “reasonably cause” others to believe that the statement was made on behalf of the University, then they should make clear that the statements are made in the employee’s individual capacity as a private citizen and do not represent the position of the University or any unit within the University.

To avoid any confusion, Policy AD92 also outlines how University resources may be used for political events or activities. Policy AD92 provides information for University-sponsored events and events hosted by student organizations; external, non-University individuals or groups; and University employees.

### **Use of University Title when Expressing Opinions to Elected Officials, the Press, Social Media, or Others**

According to ([AD07](#)), the policy on ‘Use of University Name, Symbols and/or Graphic Devices,’ employees may use their University job title “in connection with activities that meet the University’s standards and support the University’s mission.” When the use of a person’s University job title could suggest that a faculty or staff member is expressing the University’s viewpoint or position—such as when the employee holds an administrative role—it is not appropriate to use the title unless the University has officially adopted that position and the faculty member is representing it in an official capacity.

### **Use of University Name or Letterhead when Expressing Opinions to Elected Officials**

The ‘Faculty Outside Professional Activities and Conflict of Commitment’ policy ([AC80](#)) prohibits the use of University letterhead for non-University correspondence to elected officials or others, explaining that faculty “shall not adversely affect the University’s interests or mission or violate this Policy or any other University policies or regulations including, but not limited to, policies or regulations related to intellectual property, conflict of interest, use of University’s name, logo, letterhead, or other resources, etc.”

**Do Not Use Your psu.edu Email Account or Other University Resources to Engage in Personal Political Activities or to Lobby Public Officials**

The policy on 'Political Campaign Activities' ([AD92](#)) states that "University employees and representatives are also prohibited from using any University resources (e.g. facilities, funds, vehicles, copy machines, e-mail, telephones, office supplies, mailing services) for political campaign activities, unless expressly permitted in this Policy. This includes use of the University seal, letterhead, symbols, or other proprietary Marks of the University in any communication or activity that endorses a political party, campaign, or candidate."

Use of the University's email system to lobby public officials is prohibited even if the employee makes clear that the email expresses solely that individual's personal views. 'Contact with State and Federal Officials and Official Requests from Government Officials' ([AD50](#)) states, "contacts with government officials and their staffs of a personal nature, whether in writing or in person, must be made in the name of the individual making the contact and shall in no way imply that the contact is being made on behalf of the University. University letterhead and email may not be used in presenting a personal view in such cases."

If a faculty or staff member is allowed to use their psu.edu email account to share information within their expertise, they should avoid suggesting that their communication represents the University's official stance. While not required, a disclaimer such as the following can help clarify: *"Unless explicitly stated otherwise, the views expressed are personal and not those of the University or any of its units. The use of the sender's Penn State title is for identification purposes only."*

### **Right to Contact Legislators about Bills involving Topics on which the Employee is a Content Expert**

When faculty and staff members contact government officials or their staffs via letter, email, phone, social media, or in person, they must do so in their personal capacity or on behalf of a professional society, not on behalf of the University. University affiliation can be mentioned for identification purposes only.

There are times when Penn State is involved in the legislative process and may have taken a formal position on a particular bill. Faculty and staff are encouraged to contact the Penn State Office of [Government and Community Relations](#) for information before contacting members of the Legislature about legislative issues. '[Contact with State and Federal Officials and Official Requests from Government Officials](#)' ([AD50](#)) states that when a faculty member is reaching out to legislators based on their professional expertise, "University offices are encouraged to notify the [Office of Government and Community Relations](#) for assistance with the request, including coordination with relevant University offices, as appropriate."

### **Expression of Political Views in the Classroom and in Other Instructional Contexts**

Penn State upholds the principle of free expression, encouraging the exchange of diverse viewpoints and ideas among all community members. The University promotes active citizenship, including voting, campaigning, and participating in political activities at various levels. The 'Academic Freedom' policy ([AC64](#)) is not intended to restrict faculty members who have official teaching, research, or support responsibilities at the University from expressing personal opinions or engaging in political activities in their individual capacities as private citizens. However, the policy states that "No faculty member may claim as a right the privilege of discussing in the classroom controversial topics outside or unrelated to their own field of study. The faculty member is normally bound not to take advantage of their position

by introducing into the classroom provocative discussions of irrelevant subjects not within their field of study.” In addition: “Faculty members are expected to educate students to think for themselves, and to facilitate access to relevant materials that they need to form their own opinions.”

Policies and guidelines that inform this document include:

- Academic Freedom policy ([AC64](#))
- Use of University Name, Symbols and/or Graphic Devices policy ([AD07](#))
- Political Campaign Activities policy ([AD92](#))
- Contact with State and Federal Officials and Official Requests from Government Officials ([AD50](#))
- Faculty Outside Professional Activities and Conflict of Commitment ([AC80](#))

Additional information for navigating challenging issues and situations:

While there are no specific policies covering the following situations related to free expression, it is recommended that employees consider these measures to alleviate any confusion over personal views versus official University positions on various topics, whether political or otherwise:

- When using social media in your personal capacity, a best practice is to include a disclaimer on your account to distinguish your personal opinions from your professional views and activities. A line such as: *“The content and views expressed here are my own and do not represent the views or opinions of my employer or any affiliated organizations.”*
- To prevent any misunderstanding, the email signature that accompanies your psu.edu address should not contain any slogans, memes, political statements, or personal opinions.
- Leaders of University departments or units should not take political or polarizing positions in their institutional capacity, especially as an explicit statement posted to a department or unit website. Statements of this nature may have a chilling effect and inadvertently create a self-imposed silence among others. The same holds true for sweeping statements posted by a department or unit on their social media platforms.
- Faculty and staff are free to express their individual opinions as citizens outside the scope of their work duties but should remain mindful that their support of a cause can negatively affect members of our community who are impacted by the matters in question. Personal opinions expressed by employees that conflict with a student’s beliefs could lead to the student avoiding interactions with that faculty or staff member and feeling uncomfortable. Penn State remains committed to fostering a welcoming, inclusive environment where all viewpoints can be heard and respected.

To ensure our community remains a place of mutual respect and robust dialogue, it’s important to have clear guidance on expressive activities. By understanding Penn State’s policies, community members can fully participate in civic life and, together, create an environment where our community members thrive and feel empowered to express themselves responsibly.

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