WINCHESTER PRINCIPLES OF FREE ENQUIRY

WINCHESTER COLLEGE

Winchester College is a scholarly community which places the intellectual and moral formation of the individual at the core of its mission. That formation entails a commitment to excellence which is embodied in and strengthened by our communal life.

Free Intellectual Enquiry

Winchester is a place for free intellectual enquiry, which requires the free flow of ideas and knowledge. Intellectual freedom is valuable not just for its own sake but also for its essential role in enabling the pursuit of truth and sharing of knowledge. We welcome the challenge intrinsic to free intellectual enquiry, whereby arguments are advanced and disputed, beliefs articulated and challenged. Our role is not to protect young people from discomfiting ideas but to prepare them for the encounter.

As a place of learning, Winchester is hospitable to and respectful of a wide diversity of opinion. Nevertheless, because we stand *in loco parentis* to children and adolescents, we must ensure that lively and free debate is consistent with our duty of care. The College may exercise control over matters such as the timing and context of such debate, and the appropriate audience or forum. In more extreme circumstances, the College may conclude that particular views or debates may harm individuals or undermine the good order of the College community, and accordingly limit or prevent their expression – but these will only ever be rare exceptions to the general principle of free expression and open debate.

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Communal Life

We believe in the innate curiosity and resilience of young people, and have confidence in their capacity to encounter difference and disagreement.

Winchester College is also distinctive for the strength of its communal life, in which pupils and dons learn and work together. All pupils work, and most live, in the community of the boarding house. Dons are, in turn, closely associated with the houses, which thus provide a basis beyond the classroom for the cultural and intellectual life of the College. All members of the community are enriched by their relationships with those of different backgrounds and experiences, and intellectual and moral development is enlivened by constant exposure to a breadth of ideas and perspectives from intelligent and thoughtful fellow-travellers.

Pupils and dons will encounter unfamiliar ideas and divergent, uncomfortable opinions. An important aim of a Winchester education is to foster the dispositions and skills that equip young people to respond to such unfamiliar perspectives instead of condemning them instinctively as offensive.

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In the spirit of exploration, they are expected to listen carefully, assess an idea on its merits rather than the status or characteristics of the speaker, and respond with civility, assuming the sincerity of others' views and motivations. We also recognise that people learn best when they can take risks, and that young people will be most willing to do this in a community which permits them to recover from mistakes. We value the process of learning through which strong opinions may change, and we prize both tolerance and forgiveness.

Institutional Neutrality

Free intellectual enquiry is the hallmark of a Winchester education, and therefore the College does not take a position on issues of the day. When the College adopts an institutional position or makes public statements on contested matters, it necessarily inhibits the full expression of dissenting views by members of the College community.

The College may take a public stance on issues relating to educational policy and related areas of expertise, such as child and adolescent development. In such instances, staff have a professional responsibility not to undermine the College's public stance. Similarly, issues may arise which threaten the mission and fundamental values of the College. In such circumstances, which are rare, the College may actively participate in public debate in order to defend its interests and values (cf the Kalven Report 1967, University of Chicago).

Generally, however, we choose to maximise space within the College for full and active consideration of matters of public concern and controversy. In the words of the renowned Kalven Report: the neutrality of the College "arises not from a lack of courage nor out of indifference and insensitivity. It arises out of respect for free enquiry and the obligation to cherish a diversity of viewpoints."

Staff Neutrality

Staff, and especially dons, are intellectual role models. Young people observe their teachers keenly, and example is more powerful than precept. Dons should be exemplary in demonstrating rigorous, nuanced thinking, curiosity, openness, and independence of mind, enabling pupils to develop and sharpen their own thinking within the widest parameters.

Just as the College maintains institutional neutrality in order to promote free enquiry and independence of mind, so dons should recognise the inhibiting effect of expressing firm views on contested issues within the classroom. Whilst perfect objectivity is unattainable, dons should avoid framing their teaching through a particular political or ideological lens. On contested issues, staff, and especially dons, should set out conflicting points of view in an impartial manner. They should generally avoid discussing their own views and should particularly have regard to their legal duty to preserve political impartiality, which prohibits the promotion of partisan political views and requires the balanced presentation of opposing views.
(See DfE guidance: *Political Impartiality in Schools*, 21 March 2025.)

It is acknowledged that balance is not achieved simply by devoting equal attention to opposing arguments, but requires that the evidence and analytical rigour of each argument also be taken into account.

Whilst staff are, of course, free to have political affiliations and participate in political campaigns and social justice movements, they should not bring these activities into the workplace. They should also be wary of using teaching resources or arranging speakers from external organisations, where such resources or speakers may take positions or engage in activities which compromise our commitment to institutional neutrality.

The application of these principles will require judgment and the balancing of competing objectives. We affirm, however, our commitment to an education that emphasises rigorous thinking, that affords its pupils an unusual degree of freedom in the pursuit of excellence, and that has confidence in their capacity to engage productively with ideas of challenge, substance and complexity.