

“Relevance of the Kalven Report”

The aims of the second seminar (March 4, 2026) were to discuss the Kalven Report’s relevance for universities like the University of Kansas in the present moment. Since the Report was written in 1967, many scholars and administrative professionals have offered various interpretations and critiques for its defense of institutional neutrality. Arash Mafi, who recently became Provost at the University of Kansas, led the discussion on the Report, which was composed by a committee at the University of Chicago. Mafi shaped his talk as a personal investigation of the document: someone who had previously scanned the Report but was unfamiliar with its particular socio-political context and history. Mafi structured the seminar as an overview of the Report, close reading of the language, and review of several articles about the document—both “pro” and “con” institutional neutrality—soliciting insight from attendees throughout the 90-minute session.

The Report states that the university plays an essential, unique role in social and political action and that the Report writers intended to protect that role through institutional neutrality. Institutional neutrality ensures that the students and faculty members are protected to raise their voices in dissent and criticism; the university is the home to the critic, it is not the critic itself. By establishing such neutrality, which is free from the political “fashions” of the day and outside pressures, the university can support the widest diversity of views in an environment of free inquiry, benefitting faculty instructors and researchers. Since the university’s key role is to foster an environment of rigorous inquiry, it cannot collectively assert positions on any issues or resort to majority vote to establish an institutional position; such actions would necessarily silence minority views. This “neutral” stance is necessary to maintain intellectual competence, which is the basis for the university’s prestigious role in society. The only approved instances in which the university should take public stances are the following: 1) threats to its mission of intellectual competence—scholarly research that benefits society, predicated on the freedom of inquiry and forum; and 2) conflicts concerning the university’s corporate activity.

Some discussants raised issues with the Report’s applicability to the present moment and the Report’s apparent disconnect from their own experiences as employees at KU. Some of the issues participants raised include: the presumed apolitical nature of neutrality, narrow definitions of the university, inherent conflicts due the university having corporate interests, the positionality of the Report writers, considerations of non-faculty, non-student agents impacted by institutional choices made based on the Report.

Discussants pointed out that the Report itself is a political document, a piece of work developed to address the social and political climate of the 1960s. Others pointed out the inherent political nature of who gets to define what constitutes a crisis, and even what is considered “apolitical.” The Report is embedded within the Vietnam War and the then recent passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The committee wrote the Report as a response to ongoing protests to the University’s perceived investment in the Vietnam War and position on racial segregation and redlining, a

socio-political context with parallels today. One discussant recalled their experience as a college student protesting their institution's investment in South Africa during apartheid. This member mentioned that at the time, they had no knowledge of the Kalven Report. They wondered how knowledge of the Report might have changed their perspective as an undergraduate, and whether present-day college students demanding KU to take official stances on various issues (such as Israel's occupation of Palestine) know about the Report.

For some attendees, this session offered them their first opportunity to engage with the Report. However, one attendee shared their personal experience with the Report as a youth. As a high school student in the US Southeast, this attendee was introduced to the Report by an academic advisor to assist them in deciding whether to attend an HBCU (Historically Black College and University) or a recently integrated PWI (Predominantly White Institution). This attendee shared that they were advised to attend an HBCU until the social landscape proved safe to attend an integrated school. They also shared that as a high school student, many Black students were very familiar with the Kalven Report and it was discussed widely. Some such students, including this attendee, were enrolled in a leadership program that trained students to enter situations where they would navigate the questions raised within the Report.

Others contrasted the Report's stated definition of a university as a space dedicated to the freedom of inquiry with the university's long tradition of censoring student speech. Others noted the Report's role in the suppression of academic freedom and freedom of speech. Another contributor pointed to the way that the Report treats the university as a faceless entity that houses faculty and students and does not address the staff who are integral to the function of the university.

Some criticisms of the Report point to the fact that today, the university increasingly functions as a business and is beholden to its corporate interests, not intellectual competence. Others identify a troubling contour to working as state employees and academics, where criticisms of the state based on their academic expertise might jeopardize their job status. Mafi clarified that university employees are only permitted to make statements from their professional position on matters that fall within their specific area of academic expertise.

Mafi concluded the discussion with a brief overview of articles addressing the Kalven Report, many of which echo the concerns raised by seminar attendees. Some of the critiques of institutional neutrality include discrimination couched in the language of research, the presumption that the United States currently functions as a democracy, and that the university does not have an obligation to shape its student's ethics.

In support of the position of institutional neutrality, one scholar argues that neutrality ensures that universities do not become ideological churches with any one voice as its representative to the detriment of minority voices. He presents a situation in which university departments are allowed to give official stances on political issues. While a Women and Gender Studies department might state one view on abortion, a more conservative department would give

another. In either situation, a faculty member or student with a dissenting perspective might be marginalized by an official stance.

Mafi raised the alternative policy of Institutional Restraint (vs. Institutional Neutrality). In support of the position of institutional neutrality, or rather of institutional restraint, individual university employees in their capacity as such can speak on political matters from their academic expertise, but not on those outside of it.

Although the seminar did not articulate what the Kalven Report might look like if revised for the University of Kansas today, overall, discussants articulated a much different interpretation of institutional neutrality, and who or what such neutrality might benefit, than what is laid forth in the Kalven Report. Time ran out before the conversation could turn to articulating what the Kalven Report might look like if revised for the University of Kansas today.