

Will the Surge of Support for Free Speech on Campus Make a Difference?

Last month, [PEN America](#), the U.S. branch of an international organization, published a strong defense of free speech on college campuses. The nearly century-old group stands for the idea that “People everywhere have the freedom to create literature, to convey information and ideas, to express their views, and to make it possible for everyone to access the views, ideas, and literatures of others.”

Since our colleges are increasingly hostile places for such freedom, especially the expression of views that clash with leftist orthodoxy, PEN America’s hefty report [“And Campus for All”](#) is most welcome. Exactly the same principles that lead PEN to defend dissident writers in countries that make no pretense of allowing free expression apply to American campuses, where freedom to speak is supposed to be hallowed but is increasingly trampled upon.

The report addresses “the apparent chasm that has opened up between student activists and free speech advocates” by explaining why freedom of expression is important to those people—college students, faculty members, and administrators—who have so often attacked it in recent years. Free speech for all is truly “a value that transcends politics and ideology,” yet large numbers of students now demand that *their* politics and ideology must be paramount.

That points up a gigantic educational failure: Students may be studying everything from chemistry to Lady Gaga, but many never learn one of the basic tenets of civilization, namely

that all must be free to speak. Or, putting it the other way, that no one has the right to silence others.

What about campus protests? Students should be free to protest, the report declares, and (I will add) not just confined to small “free speech zones” as some schools have done. “Protest and outrage, however infelicitously or unfamiliarly it may be expressed, must be protected as free speech.” That’s right. School administrators should allow all peaceful protests and not take sides.

But the right to protest does not entitle them to shout down, much less violently interfere, with the equal rights of others to express their opinions. Lamentably, lots of students enter college with the idea that they *are so entitled* and school officials should make a point of explaining to them why they aren’t. The [University of Chicago’s stand](#) on that is exemplary.

To cite but one of many examples, students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill had every right to protest against former Representative Tom Tancredo, a conservative Republican, when he spoke on campus in 2009. They had the right to peacefully challenge Tancredo’s statements in Q&A time. Instead, however, they thought it proper to stage a [riot in the lecture hall](#) until the speaker was driven off.

Colleges ought to instruct their students that merely because they find some idea offensive or disturbing is no justification for trying to silence the speaker or do anything except argue against his point of view. PEN correctly observes that “a critical function of the university is to expose students to a diversity of viewpoints, including those with which some may vehemently disagree.” Therefore, school officials should never cave in to pressure to disinvite or

block any speaker when zealous students make those demands.

Another current campus mania is over “microaggressions”—those unintentional slights that purportedly inflict psychological damage on “marginalized” students.

The PEN report refuses to carve out an exception from free speech for this, wisely stating “Regulating everyday speech at this level, or attempting to define such insults for the entire university community, are intrusive and run the risk of prohibiting or even simply disfavoring permissible speech.” If a school falls into the trap of trying to purify all campus speech by setting up “bias incident reporting” systems (as quite a few have), the result is an environment where many students fear to speak candidly.

PEN also has sensible words regarding “trigger warnings” to warn students who might be psychologically vulnerable about material that could be upsetting. Instead of adopting a rigid, institutional policy, the report recommends leaving this up to the discretion of faculty members. That’s reasonable. For example, Professor David Clemens explained in [this article](#) why he sometimes warns students ahead of time if he believes that certain words or images might be damaging.

An individualized approach to this matter is far better than a school-wide mandate and infinitely better than letting students have veto power over parts of the curriculum because some say that reading particular works is too likely to be “triggering.” That was a demand made by some [students at Columbia University](#) earlier this year.

Finally, PEN weighs in on perhaps the hottest recent controversy on campuses—“safe spaces.” Should colleges have them? Yes, for the same reason that they should allow all

kinds of freedom of assembly. If students want to associate for any peaceful reason, they should be free to do so. The problem, the report warns, is that schools are under pressure to officially designate places so as to “exclude unwelcome views.”

That is, if some students really feel “unsafe” when a political rally for a candidate they abhor is being held, they should assemble wherever they wish. What no school should do, however, is designate a place where only the ideas those students find soothing may be uttered. Having ideological ghettos is contrary to the educational purpose of college.

Bravo to PEN America for its sturdy defense of free speech.

Will it do much good, though? The reason to doubt that it will is the well-entrenched idea among many college leaders that while free speech is good, they have to “balance” it with other considerations. Yale University provides an object lesson.

Last fall, the campus erupted when one faculty member, Erika Christakis, wrote a harmless email that mildly dissented from the idea that students must take abundant care not to choose a Halloween costume that might be thought offensive by anyone. Merely writing that email led to a vitriolic protest by students and when her husband, Nicholas Christakis, dared to address the crowd and try to restore calm, things degenerated into a screaming tirade against him. (You can read about the event [here.](#))

How did Yale’s president Peter Salovey respond? Rather than defending free speech and civility, he chose to succor the protesting students, meekly saying, “I failed you.”

Subsequently, vengeful students hounded the Christakis to the point where they decided to resign and leave Yale.

In a recent op-ed, Salovey wrote that Yale values “free expression as well as inclusivity.” But as a famous Yale Law School graduate Professor Richard Epstein notes in [this piece](#), Salovey did nothing to defend the Christakis and that as between free expression and inclusivity, “the massive level of abuse directed at Nicholas and Erika Christakis reveals how strongly Yale weighs one imperative over the other.”

Epstein is right that free speech takes a back seat in Yale’s priorities. The same is true at many other colleges and universities. Officials pay lip service to free speech but when they have to choose between upholding it and placating student radicals who don’t believe in it, they behave the way Salovey did.

When college leaders try to juggle free speech along with “diversity” and “inclusion” the usual result is that free speech gets dropped. As Epstein observes, “protected groups get to complain loudly about microaggressions against them, but they, in turn, are entitled to venomously attack those with whom they disagree.”

Officials at many schools besides Yale take that “free speech is important, but” approach. Consider [Iowa State](#), where the school is so *angst* ridden over the possibility that some student might be offended by what another says that it has a severely restrictive speech and “harassment” policy. Then it tells students who are reluctant to pledge to abide by it that they risk not being allowed to graduate if they don’t.

Elegant defenses of freedom of speech aren’t worth the paper they’re printed on unless college officials stop giving aid

and comfort to those who demand that speech be controlled to satisfy them.