

Free Speech:

*The Only Method of Fostering a Truly Welcoming Environment on Campus*

As we see University of Missouri administration resigning and Yale University faculty struggling to avoid protests, it is clear that a welcoming environment does not exist on most college campuses. It is not only the students leading protests and demonstrations who do not feel welcome. The faculty—who are doing everything in their power to stand by principles of academic freedom while appeasing the demands of the outspoken minority—feel like aliens in their own world. University efforts to create a more inclusive campus for students have not led them to feel more welcome. These rules and regulations have isolated and marginalized students in the majority in addition to the minority. However, rules that fully protect freedom of speech instead of limiting it can lead to a more welcoming environment for all students. They create a public forum where all voices can be heard, and therefore all concerns of all students are given legitimacy—empowering students to create an inviting culture for themselves. Fostering of freedom of speech on campus allows students to form their own norms which have legitimacy that campus rules and regulations cannot; thus, free speech and a welcoming environment for all students are not in conflict, but are rather complements to one another.

The rules and regulations restricting speech which universities have attempted to place upon students and faculty in the past have not led students to feel more welcome on campus. There have been myriad attempts to implement policies banning anything construed as a microaggression and outlawing questions and phrases like “Where are you from?” However,

such policies do not make students feel at ease on campus. Students continue to feel unsafe in their own environment, regardless of occasional expulsions and forced resignations. Students and faculty are not taught to think differently; instead, they are simply told not to say anything that has the slightest potential to offend or else face dire consequences like social ostracism, expulsion, or forced resignation. Attempts to increase campus inclusivity do not lead to an increase in acceptance or an elimination of implicit biases. They only change the way that students are attacked—from overt actions to more subtle ones, such as a look or body language. Even education sessions about what could be construed as a prejudiced phrase do not actually eliminate implicit bias. They only serve to create paranoia among students experiencing discrimination. Thus, regulations of speech aimed at fostering a welcoming environment on campus are completely ineffective.

Not only do speech regulations not help those experiencing oppression but they harm all students as well. The regulation of speech, both institutionally and socially, leads to a culture of fear that degrades the public forum. They make some of the most distinguished professors feel that they cannot share their thoughts for fear that something will be construed as offensive. They also block influential thinkers from being allowed on campuses, either because the majority at a university disagrees with their opinions or because administration fears the reaction among students. Thus, students are not exposed to beliefs that are different from their own, blocking their ability to examine their own beliefs—either to solidify or modify them. In a system that regulates speech, both fear and uncertainty are fostered instead of inclusion and acceptance. Speech regulating policies also serve as attacks on students' moral autonomy, telling students and faculty that they are not worthy of deciding what is just and unjust for themselves. Instead of allowing students to learn from one another, these rules teach students that differences should be ignored. This leads to norms and values that have an artificial

grounding which is based on rules rather than beliefs. As a result, real change in the campus environment does not occur.

How can a university eliminate implicit biases and foster beliefs rather than rule-following, leading to a truly welcoming environment? It can do this through the protection of free speech rather than the limiting of it. The biggest improvements in the conditions of students across the country come through exercises of free speech in the form of protests and discussions—most often discussions held in private. Protests empower participating students to stand up for themselves and communicate their feelings of isolation and marginalization. Private discussions—perhaps the most powerful tool in altering beliefs—help students to see race, gender, ethnicity, and other social categories in different ways. These forms of discourse not only give oppressed students a feeling of solidarity, but they also show students that their thoughts are being heard. Additionally, they provide critical learning opportunities for students in the majority which lead to an altering of their beliefs rather than just a change in their behavior. Allowing students and faculty to decide for themselves what is and is not appropriate is vital to the creation of long-lasting social change.

Free speech should be protected by universities, so long as it does not incite violence or interfere with the learning of students. The dismay that a student might feel due to a speaker or lecturer who has an unusual or offensive opinion is nothing compared to the empowerment that they feel when they are able to share their own opinions. A welcoming environment for all students is created when students are aware that their thoughts are valued. When students have the ability to be met with adversity, they have both the opportunity to solidify their beliefs and to alter them. Therefore, fostering free speech is a long-term strategy for eliminating prejudice and fostering a welcoming environment on campus. The creation of a public forum

allows for the entire community to analyze their beliefs and change them for the good of the whole.

Free speech and a welcoming environment are not enemies. In fact, free speech gives birth to progress. It leads to a true change in the norms and values of students and faculty alike. Policies and social practices that limit speech do not foster a more welcoming environment for students. They actually have a negative impact on most students. Equality did not come with the abolition of slavery or women's suffrage. It did not come with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Americans with Disabilities Act. These acts and movements did not single-handedly move us toward equality. Rather, they institutionalized what was being said in open discussion and demonstration. They were the result of advocacy and free speech. We need to look at the bigger picture of long-lasting social change resulting from free speech, not short-term protection from adversity. We are on an everlasting journey toward equality, and free speech is the best way to move forward on that journey.