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How Far Does Free Speech Go?

Article

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Students at Middlebury College turn their backs to a speaker in protest of the speaker's views.

WASHINGTON, D.C. (Achieve3000, June 5, 2017). On February 2, 2017, the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley) canceled an appearance by commentator Milo Yiannopoulos after protests over his views about minorities turned violent. One month later, Charles Murray, co-author of the controversial book *The Bell Curve*, was shouted down by students during a speech at Middlebury College. Accusing Murray of promoting racist views, the students objected to his speaking on campus. In 2016 and early 2017, other speeches were disrupted or canceled amid student protests. This happened at UC Davis, Brown University, New York University, and DePaul University, among others. Supporters of such protests say that speakers should not be invited to campuses to spread ideas they consider to be offensive. But others believe that the exchange of ideas—of all ideas—is an important part of free speech.

The debate has many people discussing what belongs on a college campus. Questions have arisen. If a college campus is designed for the expression of ideas and opinions, is censorship OK? Is it ever acceptable to prevent others from expressing their opinions?

Protesters and their supporters believe that it is. They say they object when colleges and universities invite speakers whose opinions are racist or otherwise prejudiced. Protesting such opinions, they argue, is itself an expression of free speech. But more than that, they say, in stopping those opinions from being expressed, they're appealing to higher principles. They say these principles take priority over free expression. They believe that shutting down offensive speech is important for a healthy, accepting society.

"If your goal is to come onto university campuses and put communities at risk, and your goal is to bash and spew hateful, racist [words], then we don't want that," said Richard Alvarado, a junior at Berkeley. "We as a community have a moral obligation to hold you accountable for it."

Today's student protesters say that free speech protections do not include language that is offensive to minorities or others, said Jeffrey Herbst. Herbst is the leader of the Newseum Institute. This is a group in Washington, D.C., that defends the First Amendment.

"I think minority groups...are especially [uncertain] about free speech these days," said Herbst. He sees a generational divide. Many of today's college students view free speech as a political weapon that has been used for harm, he says. Historically, however, the right to free speech has been considered a cherished measure of protection for all voices.

Jack Weinberg holds the more traditional view of free speech. It's a perspective he has had since he was a student activist at Berkeley in the 1960s. Weinberg was arrested in 1964 for protesting a university policy that limited student political activity. He was part of the "Free Speech Movement." His group's protests led Berkeley administrators to overturn their ban on campus political activity later that year. This paved the way for today's college protests. Weinberg says free speech should apply to everyone. Further, he believes that trying to quash ideas only helps spread them.

"When you suppress ideas, you also increase interest in those ideas," Weinberg said. "It's understandable that people want to stop [ideas that offend them]. But it doesn't work."

PEN America is a group that promotes free expression. It has also criticized the suppression of free speech. The group says universities have been trying to make campuses friendly to diverse student bodies. In the process, they have silenced speech that makes some students feel uncomfortable. At a public college, this becomes a First Amendment issue.

"The university has dual [obligations]. It has to be a place that is welcoming and open to students of all backgrounds," said Suzanne Nossel, the group's director. "But that cannot and must not come at the expense of being an open environment for speech."

Some say that colleges need to take a harder position against students who disrupt speeches. In Wisconsin, Republican lawmakers are supporting a bill that would require public universities to suspend or expel students who repeatedly interfere with others' free speech. Similar bills are under discussion in other states. Supporters of such laws believe that limiting free speech is unconstitutional.

"One can only hope that tempers will cool, and people will come to accept the virtues of living in a society where [all] speech is fully protected by the First Amendment," said Floyd Abrams. Abrams is a First Amendment attorney in New York City.

But critics say that such laws could limit a university's ability to control hate speech. That's what concerns many of the protesters as well.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

Dictionary

controversial (adjective) causing arguments or debate

offensive (adjective) having to do with something said or done that hurts feelings or makes someone feel put down

perspective (noun) point of view

virtue (noun) the worth or benefit of something