



Once home to free speech, colleges and universities now censor speech

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When the Cold War came to an end, hope was widespread that we were about to enter an era in which freedom and democracy would grow and spread worldwide. Unfortunately, the reverse seems to have happened. The state of democracy around the world fell to a record low last year, according to a report released in February by the London-based Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). It found that less than half the world's population lives under some form of democracy. The report found that 6.4 percent of the world lived in a "full democracy" last year, while more than a third lived under authoritarian rule. The United States, which received a "flawed democracy" classification, fell to 26.

One area of decline which is becoming increasingly clear is the decline in free speech, particularly at our colleges and universities. According to the Foundation for Individual Rights (FIRE) 2022 Speech Code Report, 18.5% of colleges and universities surveyed earned a "red light" rating, meaning that they had one or more policies that violated students' right to free speech. Additionally, 68% of institutions earned a "yellow light" rating, meaning these schools also had free speech restrictions.

FIRE states:

"Far too many colleges across the country fail to live up to their free speech obligations in policy and practice. No student should have to forfeit his or her free speech to attend a college or university."

Jacob Mchamgame, the author of "Free Speech," a new book that documents the history of free expression, says,

"I would argue that the culture of free speech is under attack in the U.S. And without a robust culture of free speech based on tolerance, the laws and constitutional protection will ultimately erode. People both on the left and the right are sort of coming at free speech with different angles and with different grievances that point to a general loss of faith in the First Amendment."

The University of California at Berkeley Professor John Powell, who studies civil liberties and democracy, is especially alarmed at the record number of books banned in schools all over the country. Conservatives object to books about sex, gender issues, and racial injustice, such as Toni Morrison's "Beloved," Alex Gino's "George," and "The 1619 Project." Liberals object to books containing what they think are outdated racial depictions, including such classics as John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men." Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and Harper Lee's "To Kill A Mockingbird."

The idea of not saying or teaching anything which makes anyone feel “uncomfortable,” eliminates the teaching of much of history. According to Powell, “You can’t make the Holocaust a nice thing. It wasn’t a nice thing! You can’t make slavery a nice thing. That makes people uncomfortable. It should make people uncomfortable. The goal of education is not comfort. So, if someone really wants to challenge the Holocaust, let them challenge it. But don’t ban a discussion on it.”

A study by the Cato Institute showed that 62% of Americans self-censor because they are afraid to express their political views on specific topics. For example, Jonathan Zimmerman of the University of Pennsylvania, a self-described liberal Democrat, wrote in the Chicago Tribune:

“If you’re affiliated with a college or university, and it initiates a set of diversity teachings, you probably won’t bring up research suggesting that these teachings either have a negligible impact on racial attitudes or make them worse. People might conclude that you don’t support diversity, period. That’s too big a risk to take if you don’t have tenure.”

Professor Kenneth Lasson of the University of Baltimore Law School, who specializes in civil liberties and international human rights, notes that,

“Those with opinions that might challenge campus orthodoxies are rarely invited and often disinvited after having been scheduled, or shouted down or otherwise disrupted. When protestors embroil visiting speakers, or break-in on them to take them over and list demands, or even resort to violence, administrators often choose to look the other way.”

Many students say they are increasingly “walking on eggshells,” experiencing what free speech advocates have long called “the chilling effects” of self-censorship, says Kyle Vitale, director of programs at Heterodox Academy, a nonpartisan collaborative of college professors and students committed to open inquiry and diverse viewpoints.

In a 2020 survey, Heterodox Academy found that 62% of sampled college students agreed that the climate on their campus prevents them from saying things they believe, up from 55% in 2019.

And students across the political spectrum expressed reluctance to share their ideas and opinions on politics, with 31% of self-identified Democrats, 46% of Independents, and 48% of Republicans each reporting reluctance to speak their minds.

Consider some examples of the assaults upon free speech at our universities:

***Lewis and Clark College Law School, Portland, Oregon.**

Protestors tried to shut down a talk by scholar and feminist critic Christine Hoff Sommers. After a failed attempt to get her disinvited, students repeatedly disrupted her talk with chanting and loud music.

***Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.**

Janet Mock, TV host and transgender rights activist, withdrew from a speaking event after students protested—not because of the content of her speech but because the pro-Israel Hillel Foundation was one of the sponsors of the lecture.

***California State University at Los Angeles.**

Critics attacked conservative commentator Ben Shapiro and claimed his proposed lecture—about microaggressions, Black Lives Matter, and safe spaces were “not a debate but an attack.” As a result, the university revoked his invitation—but later allowed Shapiro to come to campus after he threatened legal action.

***University of California, Berkeley.**

Nicholas Dirks, Chancellor of the university, was scheduled to have a public discussion about the value of higher education. Instead, the event was shut down after students shouted over him. The protestors said he wasn’t doing enough to help black students suffering hardships on campus—and that his salary was too high.

***The University of Chicago.**

Anita Alvarez, Cook County, Illinois State Attorney’s talk was interrupted and did not continue because of both student and nonstudent protests. Protestors claimed that Alvarez was responsible for “state violence against black and brown people in the city of Chicago.”

***The University of Chicago.**

Bassem Eid was interrupted by students advocating for the Palestinian cause. The talk by the political analyst and human rights advocate was shut down. Although a Palestinian himself, Eid was seen by critics as too supportive of Israel.

***The University of Pennsylvania.**

John Brennan, the head of the CIA, had an event substantially disrupted by protestors for his involvement with drone strikes in the Middle East. After three instances where protestors interrupted and spoke over Brennan, the event ended early.

***San Francisco State University.**

Nir Barkat, the mayor of Jerusalem, was forced by pro-Palestinian protestors to end an event early.

***Virginia Tech.**

Wall Street Journal columnist Jason Riley had his invitation revoked by the professor who invited him. He was concerned about the possible controversy because Riley, a black conservative, had written a book, “Please Stop Helping Us: How Liberals Make It Harder for Blacks to Succeed.”

We could fill pages with assaults upon free speech at our college and university campuses—and throughout our larger society as well. Yet, at all points on the political spectrum, many seem indifferent to free speech—particularly the speech of those with whom they disagree.

In his classic “On Liberty” (1859), John Stuart Mill argued that,

“...there ought to exist the fullest liberty of professing and discussing, as a matter of ethical conviction, any doctrine, however immoral it may be considered.”

I remember an era when free speech was respected far more than today.

Speakers at universities were listened to without interruption by those who disagreed. During the Vietnam War era, I worked in the U.S. Senate. I often participated in heated debates about the war. The audience was usually divided on the subject, but I don’t remember anyone trying to silence a speaker with whom they disagreed. After such debates, the opposing speakers would often go out for drinks and continue the discussion. In retrospect, I now think that some of the points made by my opponents have turned out to be correct. We would do well to debate the contentious issues in today’s American society in that spirit. A genuinely free society should settle for nothing less.