

Most Young Americans Are Not Interested in Silencing Debate

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Though colleges and universities have been open for only a few weeks, reports are already circulating of speakers and professors being cancelled or even attacked because of their ideas or speech. Yet while many are quick to condemn students and America's younger generation generally as leftists afraid to hear ideas and eager to shut down non-progressive thinkers, this reputation is unfair and inaccurate.

Just-released data make it apparent that younger Americans remain overwhelmingly centrist and open-minded. In 2019, UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute found that 67% of first-year college students were open to having their views challenged. Moreover, while large numbers of students regularly state that they do not feel that they can express unpopular opinions, more than two-thirds agree with the statement, "dissent is a critical component of the political process."

As new data from Reality Check Insights reveal, an overwhelming majority of young people are willing to shut down speech regarded as harmful and untrue—such as Holocaust denial, which 70% of Millennials and Gen Zers would ban from campuses. Yet large majorities of younger Americans oppose cancelling or limiting expressions of controversial or even offensive views: 69% would welcome a speaker on campus who opposed the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, while 81% would welcome a guest speaking in support of BLM.

In this area, at least, the young are more pro-free speech than older generations. Just 54% of Boomers, for instance, would welcome a supporter of BLM, though 70% would endorse bringing in a speaker in opposition to BLM.

Younger people believe in viewpoint diversity, but with some limits. Survey data from Cato confirms that younger Americans are more likely to believe that American society can prohibit hate speech while still protecting free speech. Two-thirds (63%) of those between 25 and 34 agree that there can be a balance. Just under half (47%) of those between 55 and 64 agree that this is possible. Older generations find the nuance harder to accept.

Collectively, these new data show that young people are not as closeminded as portrayed—so long as they regard the ideas they're hearing as legitimate. The virtues and vices of BLM are open to debate; Holocaust denial is not. Millennials and Gen Zers welcome discourse on topics worthy of debate but are not interested in giving platforms to hate speech.

Sadly, open debate and controversial ideas are becoming harder to find on college campuses, as a small but vocal group of students, usually with the support of social-justice-minded administrators, shut down topics that make them uncomfortable. New data from RealClearEducation and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education found that 60percent

of college students have self-censored and kept quiet over fears of a negative response. That figure jumps to 72% for conservative students. Schools are not protecting viewpoint diversity and open inquiry.

Young Americans grew up in a messy world of politics and ideas. They want to hear opposing views and make up their own minds without silencing legitimate speech. In my decade-plus of college teaching, I have seen controversial speakers regularly have to deal with a loud minority that wants to silence them—but this minority does not represent most students. Those who support students' wish for open inquiry and free expression should speak up however they can, because the data are unambiguous: younger Americans want to hear challenging ideas.