



Student surveys show that Trump is right about campus political correctness

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I have very little positive to say about the Trump administration over the past four years, but President Trump has been right about one thing: The intense focus on political correctness has been incredibly detrimental to the nation and, in particular, the younger generation of Americans who are in or have recently been in college.

These students, who lean a bit to the Left but have a sizable conservative contingent, have been heavily influenced by omnipresent progressive administrators in terms of what can and cannot be said. The implications for speech are now very clear: These current and former students are self-censoring. They have become guarded in asking questions, silencing themselves out of fear for shame and real repercussions.

Two new national surveys reveal the depths of this self-suppression and awareness of limited speech. The first survey is from FIRE, which looked at approximately 20,000 currently enrolled students at 55 colleges. It found that 60% of students reported feeling that they could not express an opinion because of how students, a professor, or their administration would respond. Moreover, just 15% of students reported feeling very comfortable publicly disagreeing with a professor about a controversial topic.

This is not what higher education should look like.

The second survey is from AEI's Survey Center on American Life, which recently asked Americans to choose between two positions on speech even if neither is exactly right: People need to be more careful about the language they use to avoid offending people with different backgrounds, or too many people are easily offended these days over the language that others use. In aggregate, there was a strong split down the middle: Fifty-two percent hold that too many people are easily offended, and 47% say that people should use more care.

Unsurprisingly, ideology had a significant impact. Moderates looked like the national average, but conservatives heavily skewed to the offending side at 76% and liberals to the be more careful side at 67%.

What is noteworthy here is the generational breakdown: Fifty-nine percent of Gen Z believe that people need to be more careful with their words. This is markedly different from the other groups. Millennials are about evenly split down the middle. When Gen X is factored into the picture, just 44% believe that Americans need to be more careful when speaking, and that

number is practically identical for boomers and the silent generation. Something is absolutely different about those in Gen Z — those in or just out of college today. They are keenly aware that they have to be very careful with what they say and how they say it.

The AEI survey also explored the question of discrimination by asking which of the following issues were the bigger problem facing the nation: People seeing discrimination where it really does not exist or people not seeing discrimination where it really does exist. As before, there was a significant ideological skew, but the generational cohort is hugely salient again. Two-thirds of Gen Zers (65%) saw discrimination as widespread. This was notably greater than other groups such as boomers (55%) and silents (51%), the grandparents of Gen Zers.

These theoretical positions have appreciable, real-world implications that are not often featured in survey work, and it is absolutely true that speech is different generationally. CATO surveyed thousands of Americans in 2017, and the data unambiguously shows that younger Americans are censoring themselves regularly, presumably because of the messaging they regularly have received throughout their formal educations conditioned their views about speech being harmful.

For instance, the CATO survey prompts Americans with the following: “Suppose you were at a restaurant with co-workers after work or with classmates after school, if any of the following topics came up would you be very willing, somewhat willing, somewhat unwilling, or very unwilling to share your views?” and offers a battery of 13 items from education and gun control to healthcare and abortion.

When the topic of race relations was introduced, as an example, just 56% of those 18 to 24 said that they would be willing to talk about race. This figure is 20% lower than the national average of 70% and considerably lower than the 79% of those Americans between 55 and 64 years of age who are the Gen Zer’s parents. Numerous other topics result in the same pattern: Seventy-seven percent of Americans are open to talking about issues related to immigration, but only 58% of 18 to 24-year-olds and 78% of Americans are willing to talk about poverty, but that number shrinks to 61% among 18 to 24-year-olds. Some topics produce lower skews, like the environment and education, but most topics are simply harder to talk about, such as law enforcement and LGBT+ issues.

When findings from these disparate surveys taken together, a clear narrative emerges: Younger Americans are afraid to share their views. This is not some abstract statement — younger Americans are not comfortable talking about race, poverty, sexuality, and so on because they know that an idea taken out of context or misunderstood could result in their being labeled a pariah or something far worse, with significant consequences.

Trump is right about the extreme, politically correct culture that has pervaded through our educational system is limiting debate and discussion, and this new dynamic is how viewpoint diversity and social progress die. The nation can do better than that.