



## **In the free speech wars, college students need a new champion**

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March 1, 2018

It seems every day brings yet another story about college students behaving badly – be it a violent protest, like the ones that took place across the country in 2017 at places like UC Berkeley, Middlebury College, and New York University – or some outrageous politically-correct behavior foisted upon fellow classmates, such as Evergreen College’s “Day of Absence” where white students and faculty were asked to leave campus for the day to discuss and reflect on issues of race and privilege.

There are anecdotes that seem better suited to *The Onion* than the Ivy League: consider the account by a professor from Harvard Law School who said students regularly ask to avoid “triggering” content, such as merely teaching rape law and using the word “violate”; or the case of the Northwestern University professor whose scholarly writings on sexual politics led to not one, but two protracted Title IX investigations by her own university.

Sadly, this trend appears to be worsening, not improving. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) maintains a “disinvitation database” that tracks attempts by students and faculty to disinvite speakers both from graduation ceremonies as well as throughout the year; as you might guess, the numbers have been increasing over the years.

Of course, these are only the publicized incidents that gain notice; of greater concern are the silent pressures that students face day-to-day. According to 2016 studies by both FIRE and the Knight Foundation, more than half of all college students have stopped themselves from sharing an idea or opinion in class, and almost a third have self-censored in class because they thought their words might be considered offensive to their peers.

It's not a surprise that students feel this way. In recent years, university administrations have adopted various policies such as "free speech zones," "safe spaces," and mandatory "trigger warnings." In addition, many schools have vaguely-worded speech codes that punish speech that is "unwelcome," "demeaning," "discriminatory," or creates an "intimidating," "hostile," or "offensive" environment. Because it is impossible to predict how people will feel, students refrain from speaking at all. The message is clear, and it is chilling: students with unconventional ideas should shut up and keep their opinions to themselves ... or else.

Unfortunately, when students' speech rights on campus are violated, it's tough to fight back. It's difficult and scary – not to mention expensive – for students to file lawsuits against their schools. They run the risk of retaliation not only from fellow students, but also from professors and the administration. It's such an overwhelming prospect that most students never seriously even consider it – they just keep their heads down and get their degree without rocking the boat or expressing an unpopular opinion. That may be the easy way out, but it's not a complete educational experience. We want to change that calculus.

That's why we created Speech First. By creating a membership association of students, parents, alumni, and concerned citizens from across the country who believe in free speech and free expression, we're able to support students who choose to speak out and assert their rights. It's a simple calculus: there's strength in numbers. By joining together, we've created a nationwide community to reassure students that they won't fight these cases alone – and that they'll be supported every step of the way: on campus, in the media, and in court.

We want to send a message to students that if their rights are being violated, they don't need to take it – there are people across the country who will stand with them and support them. We'd also like to send a message to universities that the era of acting with impunity is over, because if they don't reform their policies then they're going to be held accountable in court. We believe that the freedom of speech is a sacrosanct American principle, and we're sick of seeing the First Amendment trampled on college campuses.

In 1736, Benjamin Franklin wrote in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, "Freedom of speech is a principal pillar of a free government; when this support is taken away, the constitution of a free society is dissolved, and tyranny is erected on its ruins." It is in this spirit that we endeavor to defend students' freedom of speech.

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