

# TROPOLITAN

## Freedom of speech examined

Tori Roper

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“Knowledge emerges from the competition of ideas.”

Roger Pilon, the founder and director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Constitutional Studies, gave a public lecture to Troy University students on Wednesday, March 16, concerning academic freedom and free speech on college campuses.

“The Cato Institute is a public policy research organization—a think tank—dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace,” according to the Cato Institute’s website. “Its scholars and analysts conduct independent, nonpartisan research on a wide range of policy issues.”

The event was hosted by the Johnson Center for Political Economy.

“The Johnson Center underlines the concepts of a free society,” said Steve Miller, executive director of the Johnson Center and associate professor of economics and finance. “We educate students in the classroom along with the public.”

Miller introduced Pilon as “a true scholar and true gentleman.”

Following Pilon’s lecture, Pilon and Miller participated in a panel with Jorge Solis, a senior economics and political science double major from Pell City.

Pilon discussed the situations that can be classified as infringement on the freedom of speech on college campuses, including restricted free speech zones, intimidation and speakers who are uninvited from events on campuses because of a negative reaction from students or faculty.

According to Pilon, there have been 257 instances in which speakers have been uninvited from speaking engagements because of student or faculty differences in opinion.

“It is the result of the political agenda of the left,” Pilon said. “There has been an emphasis placed on a freedom from speech rather than a freedom of speech.”

Pilon said that the infringements on free speech stem from a desire to be comfortable.

“Students were not the first to seek emotional and intellectual comfort—faculty were way ahead of them,” Pilon said. “Habits of toleration are taught early in life—some have not been taught.” Pilon also addressed the difference between public and private universities in terms of free speech.

“In public institutions, students are constrained under the First Amendment,” Pilon said. “Private institutions depend on the representation they give in their catalogs.

“They can have whatever speech codes they want because they are privately funded.”

Pilon said that private universities can restrict free speech when stating that they are Catholic or Jewish. Those universities can implement certain restrictions because of the beliefs of the university, unlike public universities.

“Why is the university in the business of housing, of food, of health care?” Pilon asked. “The business functions that the university takes on distract it from its core functions.

“The beauty of markets is you have a thousand and one options to choose from.”

During the panel, a student posed a question about the cost that students incur attempting to combat infringements on speech, including financial costs along with the possibility of probation or expulsion.

“Most people will not pay the cost—thank God some will,” Pilon said. “Martin Luther King paid a cost—sitting in jail.”

“Universities are there to have a robust of ideas,” Pilon said.

Pilon discussed the works of the Foundation of Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) in advocating for students and faculty on campuses around the country who have faced consequences for pressing the restrictions on free speech.

By the standards that FIRE has set, Troy University is a red light university.

According to FIRE’s website, “a red light university has at least one policy that both clearly and

substantially restricts freedom of speech.”

FIRE has classified Troy as a red light university for its policy on harassment and discrimination, in which “examples of harassment include gestures, remarks, jokes, taunting, innuendo, display of offensive materials, threats, imposition of academic penalties, hazing, stalking, shunning or exclusion related to the discriminatory or harassment grounds.”

Although the university has earned a red light classification, the website also highlights the areas in which the university has received a green light.

The free expression section of Troy’s Student Handbook, which states that, “students at public universities enjoy robust speech rights under the Constitution in order to contribute to the marketplace of ideas, learn from each other and freely discuss and debate a wide range of issues,” has earned a green light rating.