

LINCOLN TIMES-NEWS

Lincoln County's Home Newspaper

Campus speech and progressivism

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May 17, 2017

Jeffrey Herbst, the president and CEO of the Newseum, recently released a report about free speech on campus. It is brief and well worth reading.

Herbst believes we are missing the major problem exposed by recent attacks on free speech at universities:

“Systematic public opinion polling and anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that the real problem of free expression on college campuses is much deeper than episodic moments of censorship: With little comment, an alternate understanding of the First Amendment has emerged among young people that can be called “the right to non-offensive speech.” This perspective essentially carves out an exception to the right of free speech by trying to prevent expression that is seen as particularly offensive to an identifiable group, especially if that collective is defined in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual identity. The crisis is not one of the very occasional speaker thrown off campus, however regrettable that is; rather, it is a generation that increasingly censors itself and others, largely silently but sometimes through active protest.”

Many people believe university students have adopted a “right to non-offensive speech” under the influence of their leftwing professors who are hostile to libertarian values. But Herbst shows that high school students and their teachers are equally doubtful about protecting speech that offends. He notes, “young adults come to campus with some fairly well-developed views that explain much of what subsequently occurs as they confront challenging speech.”

Herbst notes that young people support free speech in theory but not, as we have seen with Murray and others, in particular cases. In the past, polls showed that while the First Amendment in the abstract received near unanimous support, its applications to unpopular speakers sometimes failed to attract a majority. Maybe the boomers were different, and young people now are returning — ironically enough — to views held by pre-boomers.

Herbst shows that millennials in general are less supportive of free speech than older cohorts. I would like to see if this pattern holds controlling for age. Were baby boomers less supportive of free speech in 1974? If so, people may grow out of intolerance. For purposes of argument, let's assume that in the past people became more tolerant with age. Perhaps the millennials will follow that path too. But might the world have changed? Might some factor now exists that could preclude millennials from following the normal path of increasing toleration and greater support for free speech?

Maybe. Herbst argues that early education now fosters illiberalism:

“The approach to diversity in many elementary and secondary schools seems to be little more than ‘Don’t say things that could hurt others.’ While this might be very good life advice, students have come to interpret it as curtailing the First Amendment.”

What can be done to counteract this trend? The libertarian answer to most free speech problems is always: more speech. Notice, however, that education is different from most speech situations. In a normal speech situation, two people speak and argue about a topic, and neither has authority about that topic if we understand authority as a presumption of being correct. Teachers, especially teachers of children, do have such authority. And advocates of free speech cannot simply interpose themselves and their arguments between teacher and student. By the time students enter the university (which can approximate the normal speech situation), they apparently have learned to be illiberal in pursuit of “niceness.”

Private schools are another answer to this problem. If most parents want a genuinely liberal education for their children, the authority of teachers will inculcate a respect for free speech even if it offends. But what if parents value virtue or social justice more than free speech? The children of those parents may become illiberal. What then? Of course, for now private schools can only be part of the answer to our problem even if all such schools were libertarian in outlook.

We need teachers who support free speech or specifically teachers who see free speech and diversity as compatible rather than as values in conflict that should be reconciled by limiting speech. Professors and public intellectuals should be working on that reconciliation while defending a strong view on freedom of speech.

One final point. We live in a world too defined by partisanship and closed minds. Progressives may doubt the case for free speech when it is made by people who otherwise doubt progressivism. On the other hand, progressives who defend free speech will have real authority with those who doubt free speech but are otherwise progressive. The world being what it is, the future of free speech depends crucially on progressive advocates of the First Amendment. But not just them. Perhaps though, especially them.

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