

# The Washington Post

## Williams College president: Don't ignore the real threats in the debate over free speech

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November 14, 2017

Last June, at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, Sen. John Neely Kennedy (R-La.) announced that I was unfit to be a college president, so I should resign and “put [my] head in a bag.”

The insult wasn't all that bad: In my job, you get worse. I was far more concerned by the misinformation behind the pronouncement.

The senator's comment apparently referred to my February 2016 decision not to offer the blogger John Derbyshire the opportunity to speak on the Williams campus. Derbyshire, a self-described white supremacist, had been fired by the National Review for writing about how he would teach his children to avoid black people and advise other white parents to do the same.

Sen. Kennedy portrayed the controversy as a matter of campus free speech. True, my decision made Williams an early entrant into the national debate on that issue. But his comments exemplify a widespread misunderstanding about the state of speech at American colleges and universities.

Today's students are far more eager to hear and engage with serious points of view of all kinds than you would think by reading the headlines. To understand this, just tally the annual speaking engagements of Charles Murray, Arthur Brooks, Jason Riley and other prominent conservatives who regularly speak to college audiences. But you won't see many media stories titled, “Conservative Thinker Received Thoughtfully by Campus Audience.” That's not a story that sells papers.

I can offer numerous examples in support of my argument from just the Williams campus. Three weeks after I declined to host Derbyshire, Murray spoke to a respectful student audience. Later in 2016, a similarly civil gathering heard Ilya Shapiro of the Cato Institute debate Daniel Weiner of the Brennan Center on campaign finance reform.

Last November, two days after the national election, former senator Scott Brown (R-Mass.), a prominent Donald Trump supporter, participated in a well-attended analysis of the results. And American Enterprise Institute scholar Christina Hoff Sommers recently came to offer her critique of contemporary feminism. Our students listened closely, then responded with

challenging questions and in some cases blunt critiques — utterances to which they, too, surely were entitled.

My presidential colleagues could add many examples from their own schools. Such events are happening on American campuses practically every day.

What has too often been portrayed as a simple problem of liberal campuses censoring conservative ideas is something far more complex.

Sen. Kennedy himself stumbled onto the real issue when he told the hearing that schools should be allowed to respond differently to “speech that’s inflammatory; speech that uses a racial epithet; speech that’s designed to provoke” than to “a point of view that may not be popular.” The problem is that provocateurs such as Derbyshire, Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopolous are intentionally blurring the line between the two. They have few policy ideas to offer, conservative or otherwise, and little or nothing interesting to say about critical issues such as health care, foreign policy or the tax code.

Instead they’re obsessed with provoking outrage by demeaning whole populations and challenging their right to be on our campuses or in our country.

What today’s students object to is not hearing points of view different from their own, but hearing their contemporaries publicly humiliated and threatened.

Speakers such as Spencer and Yiannopolous — craving attention, backed with outside money, pumped up with social media muscle and often surrounded by literal muscle — cleverly bully students into a prescribed role in a formulaic drama: intolerant liberal “snowflakes” silencing courageous speakers of uncomfortable truths.

Private colleges have a great deal of discretion to choose which guests to invite to speak in our communities. Our campuses are not legally public squares. So these provocateurs have instead turned their focus to the more vulnerable public institutions.

Just this fall we’ve seen the University of Florida forced to spend more than \$500,000 to enable a single speech by Spencer.

And of course there were the far more agonizing costs of the tragedy in Charlottesville, which began with people carrying torches, swastikas and Confederate battle flags across the Lawn at the University of Virginia.

There are times when I’ve wondered whether we should treat these events as a type of performance rather than speech: If the World Wrestling Federation demanded to hold a cage match on the Berkeley campus, would the university be obligated to host it at public expense? The incidents we’re being forced to contend with are far more pernicious and no less staged. Nor should we be concerned solely with sensationalist speakers. Too many of our students and faculty are being threatened and harassed for expressing challenging points of view, especially

about race. Their words are picked up by websites such as Campus Reform and The College Fix, amplified and distorted and shoveled into the Internet outrage machine.

Campuses have to be shut down to deal with the ensuing threats. Learning is being disrupted, tuition money wasted, innocent people terrorized.

Some version of this drama has played out at Texas A&M. At Syracuse University. At the University of Iowa and Evergreen State and Dartmouth and Hampshire College and Trinity College and Drexel University.

How many more examples do we need? For how long are we going to allow the vocabulary of freedom to be hijacked by people trying to impress upon us its opposite?

As Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) said at yet another congressional hearing on the topic recently, “Colleges should be a place of robust speech and disagreement. . . . But, I think, we cannot use the banner of protecting free speech to allow people to terrorize folks.”

Those who care about real freedom of speech — as I do, and as I know Sen. Kennedy does — need to be far more concerned with such threats than with even the most boisterous student protest.

As an educator, I politely decline to hide my head in a bag. It’s too important for me, and Sen. Kennedy, and all of us, to keep our eyes and ears open to the rising chorus of hate.