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Deniers of the war on free speech on college campuses are dead wrong

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Does leftist zealotry on American college campuses imperil freedom of speech and liberal values, or is this a largely made-up issue that distracts from far more serious threats on the right? The latest polemics about this have been ignited by an incident at [Lewis & Clark College](#) law school in Portland, Ore., where protesters tried to shut down a talk by author, scholar and feminism critic [Christina Hoff Sommers](#).

After a failed attempt to get her disinvited, the students repeatedly disrupted her talk with chanting and loud music. To opponents of “political correctness,” this is a sign of chilling authoritarianism. Skeptical progressives argue that, despite a few highly publicized conflicts, actual data show [free expression on college campuses](#) is alive and well — and supported by most students, especially political liberals.

But there is plenty of evidence that the problem of left-wing intolerance in the universities is real and damaging.

The data cited as grounds for optimism (among others, by Vox pundit Matthew Yglesias) come from the [General Social Survey](#), which has found rising support over nearly half a century for allowing a public speech by a controversial speaker, such as a communist or a militant atheist. Yet, as Yglesias admits, there is one major exception: declining support for free speech rights for an avowed racist, especially among those under 35.

And two other recent surveys related to campus speech show disturbingly high approval for speech suppression, even by the state. In a 2017 survey by the Cato Institute and the YouGov polling firm, about half of current college students — compared to 40% of all Americans — favored government prohibition of [hate speech](#). (Disclosure: I am an unpaid adjunct scholar with the Cato Institute.)

Among all respondents with college experience, majorities of Democrats believed that speakers expressing offensive or controversial views — for instance, that police are justified in stopping

black people more frequently, or that transgender people have a mental disorder — should not be allowed to give a talk on their campus even if invited. Sizable minorities of Republicans agreed.

Meanwhile, a just-released Gallup/Knight Foundation poll of current college students finds that nearly 30% — up from 22% in 2016 — prefer a “positive” campus environment with speech prohibitions to an “open” one where offensive speech is allowed. While openness still wins, the trend is alarming. What’s more, over half of students say that inclusiveness and diversity should take priority over free speech rights. And more than a third, including half of the self-identified Democrats, believe it is at least sometimes acceptable to shout down campus speakers.

How do these attitudes translate into real life? McGill University political scientist Jeffrey Sachs has pointed out, in a Twitter thread questioning a free-speech crisis on campus, that disinvitations of college speakers are fairly rare. But disinvitation is just one kind of illiberal reaction; the aggressive disruption experienced by Sommers is another. And many incidents of leftist intolerance in the past few years have been directed not at outside speakers but at faculty members, staff, or students. Thus, Erika Christakis, formerly a Yale lecturer on early childhood education, resigned in 2015 after angry protests sparked by her defense of Halloween costumes that borrow from other cultures.

As the example of Christakis shows, the heresies today’s college protesters consider intolerably offensive are often neither bigoted nor extreme. The students who opposed Sommers as an alleged promoter of “male supremacy” pointed to her arguments that there is no sexual assault epidemic on campus and no pay gap for women and men doing the same work.

The protesters’ statement, signed by nine progressive law student groups, asserted that free speech is important but “that freedom stops when it has a negative and violent impact on other individuals.” When law students endorse such a deeply illiberal view, a free speech problem on campus definitely exists.

One may argue that right-wing authoritarianism is the bigger threat in America today. But attacks on unpopular speech in the universities can only make that threat worse, by undermining cultural support for freedom of speech and setting a precedent for speech suppression. Progressives who minimize the problem and excuse shout-downs as mere rudeness or challenge do so at their own peril.

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