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Conservative women say their peers a bigger threat to campus discourse than professors

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It's no secret that academia is dominated by liberal professors, but a recent conference suggests that they may not be the biggest impediment to free speech.

Melissa Langsam Braunstein found that students at the recent Network of Enlightened Women conference credited their liberal classmates for the collapse of civility on campus.

The conference dealt with issues like human trafficking, women's rights on an international scale, and issues with the modern feminist movement, but "the gathering's single most important message was on the importance of free speech," according to Braunstein's article in [The Federalist](#).

Caitlin Flanagan, a writer for *The Atlantic*, addressed the group and spoke about the history of the free speech movement, which originated at UC-Berkeley, and how that movement's "full-throated defense of free speech" attracted her to the liberal side of politics.

Flanagan recounted how she had a father whom she described as being "left of Karl Marx," and who was a professor, but who still asked her to consider the other side of various arguments she was presenting in favor of the political left.

Students in attendance told Braunstein that nowadays, such professors were few and far between. But what has been even more egregious is the role the students' classmates play:

While upperclassmen and recent graduates reported that it's never been easy to be a campus conservative, only one student thought things had not noticeably deteriorated since Trump won the presidency. A Syracuse Law student recounted a professor's turning class into a group therapy session the day after the 2016 election, so students could vent. An undergraduate from Temple University recalled fellow students literally rioting in Philadelphia that same day.

Since then, civility has collapsed on many campuses, while politics has infected everything. At George Washington University, there are apparently women who have stopped speaking to their own sorority sisters over politics. And one need not have voted for or otherwise supported Trump. Every woman I spoke to agreed; simply being a known campus conservative is enough to get you labeled "anti-woman" or mistreated by some fellow students.

Braunstein cites a study conducted by Emily Ekins at the Cato Institute, which [presents](#) a damning depiction of the state of civil discourse in America today:

Consider, 58 percent of Americans say they feel they can't openly express their opinions, lest they offend others. That includes 46 percent of Democrats, 58 percent of Independents, and 73 percent of Republicans. Among campus conservatives, that last number is presumably much higher, as multiple NeW attendees described waiting to share their political affiliation and views until after they were sure new friends knew them as people.

It's hard to share unorthodox views on campus, including something as seemingly neutral as being pro-First Amendment. Now, 53 percent of Democrats and 31 percent of Republicans believe that if you support someone else's right to say racist things it is as bad as holding those racist views yourself. Sixty-six percent of Democrats and 41 percent of Republicans even told pollsters that hate speech is an act of violence.

Braunstein concludes by offering some hope that the conference shows a desire to allow different voices to be heard without fear of retribution. Such hope is needed to return higher education to the values once espoused by the Free Speech Movement.