

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Free speech on college campus

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December 1, 2015

Outrage continues at Yale as the campus grapples with how to balance fostering social equality and protecting free speech. This debate has revealed that far too many of our nation's brightest students believe that free speech and social equality are at odds.

The confusion is illustrated at Yale by student uproar over an email that Erika Christakis, an early-childhood education lecturer, sent to the students of the residential community she oversees with her husband, professor Nicholas Christakis. The email expressed skepticism about university attempts to regulate student Halloween costumes and instead urged students to exercise their own judgment and, if necessary, use free speech and open dialogue to combat offensive costumes.

Students have since demanded that the Christakis be removed from their roles at Silliman College because the email's words had hurt them and made their home unsafe. The controversy did not center on being allowed to wear offensive costumes, but on saying one supports allowing that free expression. Students later confronted Nicholas Christakis demanding an apology. The dialogue plays out like a Free Speech 101 class:

"I am sorry for causing you pain," Christakis reiterated, but "I stand behind free speech."

"Even if it's offensive?" one student asked. "Even when it denigrates me?" asked another.

Christakis reaffirmed: "Even when it's offensive, even when it denigrates you - even though I don't agree with the content of the speech. I have the same objections to the speech that you do! . . . But I defend the right of people to speak their minds. Including you!"

This may have been the first time some heard that allowing free speech is not synonymous with endorsing its content. Given this misunderstanding, it's perhaps more understandable why students felt disrespected.

The confusion suggests we must reiterate free speech's importance:

What constitutes offensive speech can be highly subjective. One student's war protest could be seen as offensive to veterans, or a Black Lives Matter protest could be viewed as "anti-cop." Stating that "America is the land of opportunity," while innocuous to some, could be dubbed a "micro-aggression" and thus nearly an act of violence by others.

Free speech can be an asset to the less powerful against the powerful. If free speech were not an asset of the less powerful, why in the 1830s did Southern state legislatures pass laws preventing postmasters from delivering abolitionist pamphlets? Or why did the FBI send threatening letters to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. implying that he stop his efforts or even commit suicide? The power of speech to combat oppression is a central reason that the powerful have sought to hamper it.

More speech is the best tool against offensive speech. Campus speech codes treat the symptom, not the cause - which is bigotry. As the ACLU put it: "When hate is out in the open, people can see the problem. Then they can organize effectively to counter bad attitudes, possibly change them, and forge solidarity against the forces of intolerance."

Free speech is indivisible. Tactics used to silence others' offensive speech today could be used to silence our speech in the future. And laws that protect offensive speech can also be used to defend activists' rights. The ACLU points out that the precedent used to defend 1960s civil rights protesters was based on a 1949 case defending an ex-Catholic priest who delivered a racist speech.

There is genuine frustration on college campuses over racial discrimination in explicit and implicit forms: This must be addressed. All the more reason to show students how to exercise their speech rights to combat oppression: teaching them how to listen to different arguments, evaluate them, and respond with civil arguments based on evidence.

The course of history has not been able to avoid the power of ideas and persuasion by reason. Let us reiterate to the next generation these lessons and hope to persuade them not to give up on freedom, because freedom is what ultimately pushes our country forward.

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