

Tolerating Difference: Free Speech on Campus

Written by Jan Lüdert

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/05/05/tolerating-difference-free-speech-on-campus/>

JAN LÜDERT, MAY 5 2017

Incidents in which students opposed controversial talks have been reported across US campuses. Students at a number of universities protested speakers, hindered or blocked their appearances, and in some cases reverted to violence. At Middlebury College, in March 2017, Charles Murray, the controversial co-author of *The Bell Curve* – a book that linked intelligence and race – was prevented from speaking publicly and attacked after a live-streamed discussion with a professor. Heather Mac Donald, received disapproval after her 2016 publication *The War on Cops*, in which she criticizes the Black Lives Matter movement. When she spoke at Claremont College students blocked entry to the building, demanded the talk to be stopped and chanted down the speaker during Q&A.

What are we to make of these expressions of dissent? Are students enacting a healthy expression of free speech or are we witnessing growing intolerance and forms of bounded speech? Free speech is intended to prevent censorship without fear of government retaliation or social sanctioning, it is meant to give people a right to express their ideas publicly, however detesting or disturbing. For universities, the free exchange of ideas is a foundational principle. It is enshrined in what we call academic freedom and one that draws academics to conduct their research and to disseminate their thoughts and ideas through the ivory tower. Students likewise enter universities to learn from their professors, from each other, and in the process are encouraged to challenge their own thinking with the goal to emerge as critical thinkers upon graduation.

University campuses, as such, have long offered a stage on which social and political confrontation are played out. Let's keep it that way. Indeed, students from various campuses recently endorsed the value of open expression in higher education. In their statement of principles, they affirmed that "while some speech may be objectionable and even hateful, constitutionally protected speech ought to be held and enforced as the standard and must not be infringed upon." These student-led initiatives are laudable as they support a basic and necessary tenant of civil discourse across (sometimes stark) divisions. Yet again there is a much more insidious development underway, and found in a growing oversensitivity of college students, demanding not to be confronted by words and ideas they do not like or which they detest. A 2016 Gallup survey for instance found that 54% of college students agree that the climate on their campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive. In practices, this has given rise to protests against unwanted speakers on college campuses but also includes demands for Professors to issue "trigger warnings" during class time if something in a course might cause a strong emotional response or to condemn actions that constitute veiled "microaggressions."

While I see nothing wrong with giving trigger warnings when teaching classes on genocide, religion or identity politics, for example, there is a danger in focusing more on ensuring political correctness and protecting students at the expense of allowing them to think for themselves, to disagree and to dispute. An environment in which free speech is increasingly delimited leads to intolerance and creates a paternalistic space that stifles rational argumentation. It is perhaps one of the reasons why students choose to oppose speakers who they disagree with instead of confronting them on the merits of their work. In short, if we want our students to tolerate difference we – as educators – ought to create a space in which students are free to speak their mind and to encourage them to evaluate the ideas of others. This is not an easy task but one worth pursuing.

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About the author:

Dr. Jan Lüdert is the Head of Programs at the DWIH – German Centre for Research and Innovation New York City. He previously served as Associate Professor at City University of Seattle where he was the inaugural Director of Curriculum and Instruction. He has held positions as Visiting Research Scholar at the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at City University of New York's Graduate Center as well as Research Associate with the DFG 'Dynamics of Security' project at Philipps Marburg University. He is an alumnus of Seattle's World Affairs Council Fellows and UBC Liu Institute for Global Issues Scholar programs. He is the author of *Non-State Actors at the United Nations* (Routledge); co-author of *The United Nations Trusteeship System* (Routledge); and editor of *Signature Pedagogies in International Relations* (E-International Relations).