

Monkey Cage Analysis

The 'campus free speech crisis' is a myth. Here are the facts.

By Jeffrey Adam Sachs
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Universities are supposed to be places where you confront unfamiliar and challenging ideas. According to some critics, however, students today are turning their backs on that concept of welcoming free speech. Instead, the argument goes, young people want to transform campuses into "safe spaces" where offensive speech is banned and political correctness is enforced.

There's just one problem: This narrative is wrong. Let's examine three myths about free speech on campus.

Myth #1: Young people in general (and college students in particular) don't support free speech

In fact, the opposite is true. For nearly 50 years, the General Social Survey (GSS) has asked Americans about their tolerance for offensive speech. Some questions include: Should an anti-American Muslim cleric be permitted to teach in a public school? Should the local library stock books hostile to religion?

On almost every question, young people aged 18 to 34 are the most likely to support free speech. Check out the data for yourself. Not only are young people the most likely to express tolerance for offensive speech, but with almost every question posed by the GSS, each generation of young people has been more tolerant than the last.

Consider the question of whether someone who is gay should be allowed to make a speech in your community:

And here is the trend for answering whether an advocate for a military coup should be allowed to teach in your local school:

There are two important problems with this data. First, not everyone age 18 to 34 is a student. Moreover, the GSS does not sample residents of "institutions and group quarters," which includes students who live in dorms. So while the GSS can tell us something important about young people in general, it is less useful for explaining the situation on campus.

Second, some critics have argued that the GSS is not a reliable measure of young people's tolerance for offensive speech because some of the kinds of speech it queries (by communists, the anti-religious, etc.) is less likely to be offensive to the young. In other words, the forms of speech described by the GSS may not all satisfy the "objection precondition" of being offensive to the listener.

This is a reasonable point, though note that on the issue of permitting racist speech, which we might expect the young to be especially prone to oppose, they are broadly in line with the national average. Willingness to allow

such speech declined sharply in the early 1980s; it declined again, although not as sharply, in the 2000s. But it is difficult to see any evidence of a generational crisis.

Furthermore, in a 2018 Gallup-Knight Foundation survey, the vast majority of students (70 percent) said that they preferred their campus to be an “open learning environment” where they might be exposed to offensive speech, while only 29 percent said they preferred a “positive” environment where offensive speech is banned.

In fact, students were actually more supportive of an open learning environment than U.S. adults overall, based on this 2016 survey.

And while other studies paint a more alarming picture, subsequent research has raised serious questions about their findings.

Of course, college students are not a monolith. Their race and gender (that is, the likelihood that one is the target of racism or sexism) influences their tolerance of free speech. Very conservative students also tend to report that they are less comfortable expressing themselves in the classroom than very liberal students. And according to the 2018 Gallup-Knight Foundation survey, students were more willing to support speech restrictions when given specific scenarios, like using slurs against certain groups, which 73 percent were willing to restrict, or wearing costumes that stereotype racial or ethnic groups, which 60 percent were willing to restrict.

However, to the extent that college students are hostile to certain viewpoints or support restrictions on speech, college itself may be part of the solution. That brings us to the second myth.

Myth #2: Universities make students less tolerant of offensive or opposing speech

Consider the findings of one recent survey of over 7,000 students from more than 120 schools. After one year of college, a plurality reported improved attitudes toward students holding opposing political views.

Similarly, a 2009 study from the University of California at Los Angeles, the most recent publicly available, found that college seniors were 6 percentage points less likely to support a campus ban on racist or sexist speech than when those same students were surveyed as freshmen. In other words, evidence suggests that college attendance may actually bolster a student’s support for free speech rather than undermine it.

Myth #3: Universities may claim to support free speech, but their actions show otherwise

This one is not so much a myth as an exaggeration. In particular cases, students, professors or members of the community have tried to block controversial speakers or demand that faculty be fired for airing offensive views.

But these incidents are rare. Take the phenomenon of blocking invited speakers from speaking on campus, also known as no-platforming. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) reported 35 no-platforming attempts in 2017; out of those, 19 succeeded. In a country with over 4,700 schools, that hardly constitutes a crisis.

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Finally, despite claims that college administrators are increasingly coddling students with speech codes, FIRE shows that the opposite is the case. The number of universities with restrictive speech codes has been dropping each year for the past decade and is currently at an all-time low. Most universities are not the ideological safe spaces their critics imagine.

In fact, our speech is often much more restricted off campus than on. Consider the workplace, where most non-students spend the bulk of their time when not at home. Once you're on the job, most First Amendment rights disappear. The things you say, the clothing you wear, even the bumper stickers on the car you parked in the company lot — all can be restricted by private-sector employers. Perhaps the reason campus free speech controversies can sound so strange is because few of us are aware of how much we are already shielded from hateful or offensive speech.

Of course, there are indeed threats to free speech — on college campuses as there are elsewhere. But in the case of the standard narrative of the “campus free speech crisis,” there's a good deal less than meets the eye.

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