

Free Speech Crisis on College Campuses Threatens First Amendment Future

It's a sad reflection on our country that so many university students lack a fundamental understanding of the First Amendment and the protections it provides for freedom of expression. A recent survey by the Brookings Institute offers valuable insight on campus opinions on free speech. Of the 1,500 college students who were surveyed, 44% believe the First Amendment does not provide protections for "hate speech" while 51% agree that it's acceptable for protesters to disrupt speakers espousing ideas they do not agree with.^[1] Most strikingly, 53% prefer an learning environment where offense viewpoints are prohibited.

If our best and brightest students who have made it to a four-year university fail to grasp what free speech really is and are unwilling to listen to dissenting views, that is a troubling sign for our republic. If students who are receiving a high level of education cannot understand the First Amendment, then who will? Universities are where we train the leaders of tomorrow in both the private and public sectors. These are the leaders that will be entrusted into positions of great influence and will make critical decisions that affect our society. Their views on the First Amendment will have a large effect on the future of the country.

College is supposed to be an environment for debating different ideas and ideologies. It is supposed to be a place where knowledge is the ultimate pursuit--not political correctness. If we cannot engage in honest debate at our universities, then where will these debates happen? While anecdotal evidence has been mounting for years about the free speech crisis happening on campuses around the country, the Brookings Institute survey shows just how dire the current situation is.

There is no prohibition in the constitution against "hate speech" or offensive ideas. The Supreme Court affirmed earlier this year in the *Matal v. Tam* case, that attempting to restrict offensive speech strikes at the heart of the constitution.^[2] The First Amendment not only protects hate speech from outright prohibition, it also shields it from lesser restrictions. The justices cautioned against the precedent of allowing the government to determine what is offensive and how this power could be turned against minority groups with dissenting views.

Students who believe that offensive ideas should be prohibited would do well to take note of the Supreme Court's warning. There may be a day when the ideas they hold dear are considered "offensive". If a person is unwilling to even listen to an opposing view, they need to consider the inverse scenario where their own ideas are unworthy of debate. It's easy to shut down opposing views when your ideas are in the majority, it's quite another when you are on the other side of the debate. Today, we already face challenges on how political debates and discussions occur. Too many Americans do not have their viewpoints challenged

and often surround themselves with only those who agree with them--leading to the political polarization that has dominated the last decade. We need to have as many places as we can for open debate and universities should be the prime venue for this. Unfortunately, they are not.

How we correct this misperception of the First Amendment will be critical to the future of United States which is why we need university leaders to take this crisis very seriously. They must make every effort to teach what the constitution really says about offensive speech and they must educate students about the danger of shutting down opposing viewpoints. More importantly, they must take bold steps to protect free speech on campus and end the all too familiar pattern of protests that block speakers who have differing viewpoints. Students must also get a more in-depth understanding of the First Amendment starting in junior high and high school so when they arrive in college, they have a solid base of knowledge to operate from.

Our university students are the next generation of leaders. If they do not believe in the importance of protecting free speech and open debate, the First Amendment itself will be at risk.

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^[1] <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2017/09/18/views-among-college-students-regarding-the-first-amendment-results-from-a-new-survey/>

^[2] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2017/06/19/supreme-court-unanimously-reaffirms-there-is-no-hate-speech-exception-to-the-first-amendment/>