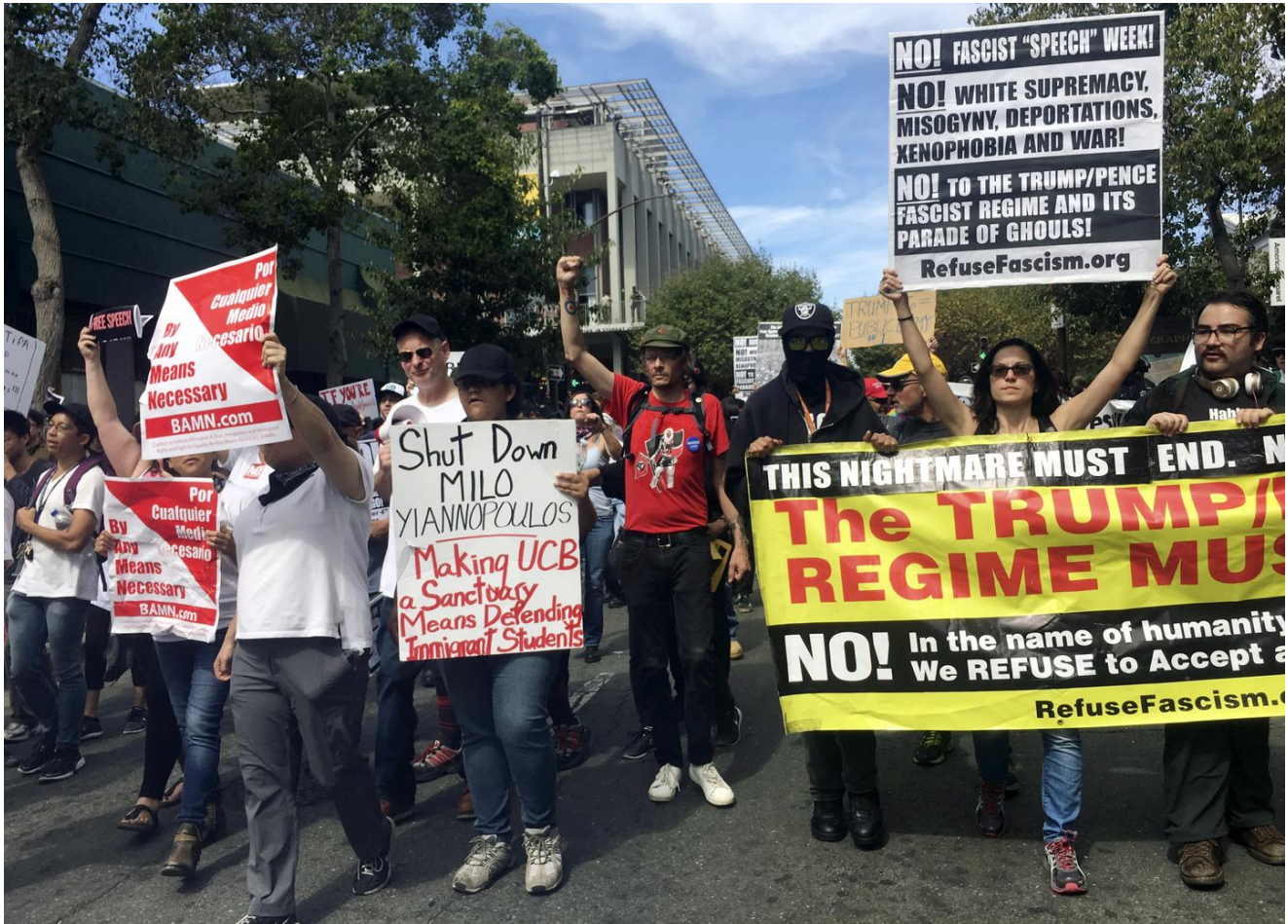


Colleges' Central Mission Erodes -- and Free Speech With It

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COMMENTARY



AP Photo/Daisy Nguyen

Only apologists determined to avert their eyes and cover their ears could deny with a straight face that higher education in America today nurses hostility to free speech.

Sporadic eruptions of that hostility have made the headlines. Last year, in early February, violent protests swept across the University of California, Berkeley against right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos, causing the university to cancel his speech. In March, Middlebury College students disrupted a talk by the distinguished American Enterprise Institute social scientist Charles Murray and assaulted his host, Professor Allison Stanger, sending her to the hospital. In April, fear of more violence compelled UC-Berkeley to rescind an invitation to the acerbic conservative columnist Ann Coulter. Last fall semester, student efforts to shut down speech on campus skyrocketed.

Less overt forms of hostility to free speech on campus run deeper. Colleges and universities teach students that free speech is merely one among many values. Campus authorities encourage students to expect that schools will silence, or at least cordon off, offensive opinions. In the humanities and social sciences, professors routinely exclude from class discussion, syllabi, and departmental offerings ideas for which a good case can be made but with which they disagree.

Some want to believe that controversies over campus free speech are a tempest in a teapot. While acknowledging that walling off students from disfavored opinions for four or five years may instill bad intellectual habits, the optimists suppose that once these graduates take their place in the real world they'll quickly discover that the Constitution provides broad protection for speech, including the expression of, say, conservative convictions that university majorities often deem appalling and degrading. The hope is that hostility to free speech nursed on campus stays on campuses.

In "Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech," Keith Whittington rejects such complacency. "The current crisis of free speech on college campuses," he contends, "is both symptom and cause of a larger threat to the maintenance of liberal democracy itself." While liberal democracies have a variety of reasons for protecting free speech, universities must safeguard it "because of its utility in generating, testing, and communicating ideas," according to Whittington. "Sacrificing speech subverts the very rationale for having a university and hampers the ability of universities to achieve their most basic goals."

A professor of politics at Princeton specializing in American constitutional history, Whittington is proud of his profession and regards the modern university as "one of the great achievements of American civilization." Despite the numerous and varied examples he offers throughout his book of the assault on free speech, he cautions against exaggerating the dysfunction in higher education. Yet his contention that university administrators and faculty are shrinking free speech because they are losing sight of the university's central mission justifies grave concern.

That central mission is, Whittington writes, "to produce and disseminate knowledge." This involves both synthesizing existing knowledge and pushing forward knowledge's frontiers. These complementary activities — breakthroughs and innovations generally require mastery of what has gone before — ultimately depend on a community of scholars engaged in "a conversation that extends across generations and across the globe." The production and dissemination of knowledge also require scholars to communicate their knowledge through teaching. For Whittington, scholarship and teaching are "mutually reinforcing" aspects of the university's mission.

Neither a business nor a partisan undertaking, the university — as part of its core mission — was not designed to pursue profit or promote social justice. But, Whittington argues, through dedication to preserving the intellectual treasures of the past, fostering critical scrutiny of

institutions and beliefs, and incubating new ideas, universities promote technological change, economic growth, and the general welfare of society.

By adhering to their nonpolitical mission, moreover, they fortify civic life. A university that seeks the truth enhances appreciation of the wisdom embedded in tradition. It sharpens insight into the flaws of established practices. And it cultivates the toleration and thoughtfulness that enable a diverse and free citizenry to live together fruitfully and to deliberate effectively about public affairs.

Whittington associates the two principal rationales for the free speech that sustains the university's mission with Thomas Jefferson and John Stuart Mill. The Jeffersonian argument focuses on the practical obstacles to restricting speech justly in a free society. While acknowledging the harm caused by nasty sentiments and ugly utterances, it asserts that even the most enlightened official is not sufficiently wise or restrained to wield responsibly the censor's awesome power. The Millian argument advances a philosophical claim about human flourishing. It states that the pursuit of truth is central to a well-lived life and depends on testing one's convictions by exploring competing ideas and grappling with unorthodox views.

Against the common belief that universities confront a painful tradeoff between free speech and diversity and inclusion, Whittington observes that the university is an "extraordinarily inclusive community" because it "welcomes all those who wish to honestly examine their lives, their beliefs, their ideals." At the same time, he acknowledges that the university is a challenging community that cannot accommodate "those who prefer to be sheltered from such searching interrogations." There are plenty of communities in a free society that provide refuge to members from the unfettered exchange of opinions, but the university — at least if it seeks to generate and communicate knowledge — is not one of them.

In Whittington's view, the use of trigger warnings and safe spaces on campus to fetter thought and expression represents the abuse of legitimate concerns. The encounter with certain objects, events, or ideas may "trigger" debilitating symptoms in those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. On campuses today, however, students seek trigger warnings to quarantine topics that they find unpleasant or contemptible.

The idea of safe spaces also springs from a therapeutic context: They were conceived to provide patients a place to share emotions without fear of mockery or reproach. Now students demand them as sites, sometimes extending to the entire campus, cleansed of every discordant belief and unorthodox judgment. Whittington encourages the search for reasonable accommodation for students suffering from genuine medical disorders but firmly resists encroachments on campus free speech based on partisan goals or special pleading. "When speech is suppressed," he writes, "it is the community that suffers from having their intellectual world darkened."

As a Millian proponent of free speech and the viewpoint diversity in which it thrives, as well as a Jeffersonian pragmatist who knows that university administrators and faculty members — like the rest of us — cannot be safely authorized to police speech, Whittington would also enjoin universities from disciplining faculty for ignorant and vile extramural remarks outside their professional fields.

Whittington's sophisticated and coolheaded defense of free speech, however, is the rare exception. He is right that if universities are to honor their mission and make their distinctive contribution to the nation, then "the members of the campus community will need to preserve the college campus as a sanctuary for serious debate of unorthodox ideas and avoid succumbing to the temptation to make" universities "echo chambers of orthodox creeds." But where will he find colleagues to rally to the cause?

Reformers, too, must not avert their eyes and cover their ears. A serious campaign to restore free speech on campus will be an arduous and long-term undertaking. It depends on nothing less than educating the educators.

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