

THE REAL ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY

Civilised debate on campus is crucial if the university is to prepare students for democratic citizenship, argues **Steven Schwartz**

In October this year, students at the University of Oregon in the United States shouted down their university president when he tried to speak on campus. The students demanded control over campus speakers claiming ‘fascists’ and ‘neo-Nazis’ made them feel unsafe. They would probably find it difficult to imagine that there was once a time when real Nazis spoke at prestigious universities.

In 1966, students at the Ivy League Brown University invited George Lincoln Rockwell, holocaust denier, campaigner against civil rights, and founder of the American Nazi Party to speak on campus. Politicians, community leaders and some academics fiercely opposed Rockwell’s invitation. If there was ever a person who deserved to be silenced, surely it was this despicable man. But the students held their ground, and the talk went ahead.

Rockwell, who briefly studied at Brown, performed as expected—mixing racism and anti-Semitism with repugnant remarks about gay men. Some students heckled, others laughed, but no attempt was made to disrupt him. Another American Nazi Party official, Captain Ralph Forbes, spoke at the University of California, Berkeley. That event also passed without incident.

These talks took place in the 1960s when civil rights and anti-war protests were at their zenith. Students were rebelling against campus speech restrictions, and campus leaders were on their

side. According to Clark Kerr, the University of California president at that time, ‘The University is not engaged in making ideas safe for students. It is engaged in making students safe for ideas.’

Fast forward 50 years to the present. The right to speak on campus is more contentious than ever, but the protagonists have reversed roles. Those outside the university—politicians, journalists and community leaders—lament campus censorship while students are becoming increasingly intolerant.

A 2015 poll of university students, commissioned by Yale University, found that 51% favoured regulating speech on campus. And almost two-thirds wanted academics to issue trigger warnings before presenting potentially ‘disturbing’ materials to students. In Clark Kerr’s terms, these students preferred to be kept safe from challenging ideas.



Steven Schwartz is a Senior Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS). He has served as Vice Chancellor of three universities in Australia and England. This article is based on his remarks to a CIS panel discussion, ‘What’s Happened to the University?’, held in Sydney on 26 September 2017. The full discussion will be available as a CIS Occasional Paper in January 2018.

A year later, a Knight Foundation poll revealed that 69% of university students favoured restricting speech that is offensive to specific groups while 63% would ban the wearing of costumes that belong to racial or ethnic groups.

In September this year, the Brookings Institution reported that half of the 1500 students they polled believes it is acceptable to silence a speaker by shouting while 19% supported the use of violence to silence speakers whose views they find objectionable. When further asked about what sort of climate a university should have—whether it should be what was labelled a ‘positive’ learning environment in which certain things were not allowed to be discussed, or whether it should be an open learning environment in which everything can be discussed—61% chose the former.

These polls are not perfect, and their methods are open to criticism, but their consistency suggests a profound change in students’ attitude toward free speech. It is a safe bet that no Nazis will be speaking on campus today. No great loss, you might think. But it is not just Nazis who fall foul of campus speech restrictions. Sociologists, columnists, writers and scientists have all been silenced.

Right-wing critics complain that campus censorship is a tactic devised by left-leaning students and academics to silence ‘right-wing’ speakers. Perhaps, but once the censorship genie escapes from the bottle, everyone becomes fair game. On four occasions this year, international students studying in Australian universities have complained about teachers whom they believe ‘insulted’ China. In each case, academics were quickly ‘re-educated’ and sent forth to apologise for such transgressions as suggesting that Taiwan might be an independent country.

Everyone champions freedom of expression in the abstract, but few can resist calling for censorship when they do not like what is being expressed. But, of course, that is the only time when freedom of expression actually counts. Students who call for safe spaces and trigger warnings are trying to avoid challenging ideas and concepts. They probably don’t realise it, but they are challenging the very mission of a university.

Universities do more than simply prepare students for a career; their mission goes well beyond vocational training. The mission of universities, or at least Western universities, is to prepare students for citizenship in a democracy.

Democracy makes huge demands on its citizens. People cannot just defer to authority as they can in a dictatorship. They have to think, gather information, weigh the pros and cons, analyse, and come up with a conclusion for themselves that they will then use when they go to vote in an election, or in a poll, or on a jury. All these things are required of people who live in a democracy. But people will never be able to do these things unless they are exposed to ideas that are difficult or different from their own. If they are not exposed to ideas that are different from theirs, they never get a chance to vet the arguments and hear the other side.

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One of the great benefits of studying in an Australian university is that students get to study with people from all over the world who have different ideas on a range of issues. In such a diverse group of students there is likely to be every position available or conceivable on many issues. Debating these topics using logic and evidence actually educates students. But it does something more than that. It also enhances their mutual respect and understanding because when they are involved in civil and logical debate with other people they can eventually learn that people may have different views from them without necessarily being stupid or evil.

For the health of our society—and for the health of the future of our society—that kind of mutual respect and understanding might be the most important thing that students learn at university.

Today’s university students will grow up to be tomorrow’s teachers, lawyers, politicians and

judges. If they believe that controversial speakers and issues are too dangerous to discuss, that view might colour their decisions when they move into positions of authority in their careers. We therefore cannot afford to allow students to opt out.

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One solution is to try to balance controversial speakers with those who hold different views. This is normally good advice, but balance is not necessarily always possible. Sometimes it is even undesirable. The reason is that that all ideas cannot be considered equal in a university. Otherwise scientists would have to teach creationism, philosophers would have to teach the kabbalah, and medical deans would have to allow time for anti-vaccine campaigners in a medical course.

Now don't get me wrong. I believe in complete freedom of speech. I believe that people can say whatever they like. They can say the earth is flat.

Nobody can stop them. But that does not entitle them to lecture in geography at a university. There is no moral or ethical or philosophical principle that requires a university to provide a forum for weird and divergent ideas. In a university, expertise is always a pre-requisite. Universities are entitled to require that academic opinions derive from the work of competent scholars. They're entitled to insist that lecturers are fair and accurate, and that they assess evidence using the accepted norms and procedures and methods of their profession.

I believe that creating a climate for the civilised debate of controversial ideas is essential if the university is to meet its mission of preparing students for democratic citizenship. However, that does not require that every conceivable viewpoint be accommodated on campus. Universities are—and should remain—places of learning in which respect is given to expertise, scholarship, skill, accuracy, competence, truthfulness and civility.

For the good of our democracy and for the good of our country, we need to do a much better job of convincing students that the best way to respond to controversial speakers, difficult ideas and challenging notions is with informed debate and not with censorship and violence.