

2024 Yale Essay Contest Second Place Winner

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The Real Campus Free Speech Crisis: A Case for Uncivil Discourse

A profound crisis in free speech has gripped college campuses across America: cowardice. Or, perhaps more accurately, it is the absence of courage—a deficiency that is deeply rooted in how we engage with ideas and foster dialogue. This crisis, shrouded beneath the veneer of free speech debates and civil discourse narratives, belies a deeper, more profound malaise: the absence of authentic, unbridled expression. While everyone claims to champion the right to speak freely, the real battle being fought on campuses today is over how that freedom is permitted to manifest and whether it is accompanied by the courage necessary to make it meaningful.

At the heart of this issue are organizations and institutions that claim to be defenders of free speech. These groups, which see themselves as champions of uninhibited dialogue, often find themselves in a paradoxical pursuit: attempting to manage and control audience reactions under the guise of promoting “civility.” These organizations presume that the audience must remain passive, withholding any response, as if the act of listening should be divorced from the natural impulse to react. They demand of the audience a deference, a respect, which the speaker, in their own manner of address, has not afforded them—a paradox of civility, where one side is asked to exercise restraint while the other indulges in unchallenged expression. This veiled approach overlooks the central protagonist in the theater of free speech: the speaker. It is the speaker's unadulterated voice that is safeguarded by free speech principles. Likewise, the audience's unfiltered voice is equally protected by these principles.

The language of “civil discourse,” while noble in intent, has devolved into a lexicon of convenience, where nuanced discussions yield to sanitized exchanges. This sanitized dialogue, devoid of the raw emotion and authenticity that underpin any sort of meaningful discourse, is supposedly in pursuit of the truth. But what this asks of the speaker and the audience is to disavow a more fundamental truth in expression. In order to find truth in a democracy, the means by which we pursue it have to be just as honest—and any attempt to sanitize the means of expression inherently undermines the ends of discourse.

In navigating topics as complex and contentious as racism or Israel-Palestine, the demand for uncensored expression becomes not just a preference but a moral imperative. These are not abstract debates confined to the ivory tower; they are visceral, palpable realities that demand unflinching engagement and cannot simply be reduced to theoretical concepts that are neatly debated within the confines of civility. To ask people to stifle their emotions in favor of “civility” is to ask them to disavow the very truth of their experience. It is to deny them the opportunity to engage with the topic in a way that is truly authentic and, by doing so, we again miss the opportunity for truth.

The protests erupting across college campuses in response to these issues are a prime example of this dynamic at play. Rather than stifling these protests enforcing administrative codes of conduct

that prioritize calm over candor, we should be encouraging them. Protests, in their raw, passionate expression of dissatisfaction, are a vital component of democracy. They represent the insistence that voices be heard, even if what is being said is uncomfortable. Instead of suppressing these voices, we should be encouraging counter-protestors to go and make their voices equally heard. The answer to free speech is always more speech, not less.

At its core, democracy thrives on dissent and discord—on the clash of ideas unfettered by artificial constraints. It is in moments of tension and disagreement that the true strength of democratic values can be seen. Lionel Trilling extolled democracy's need for its "daemon"—the intrinsic drive toward chaos and conflict that forms the lifeblood of a healthy democracy. It is through this daemon that democracy remains a living, evolving system rather than a static set of rules and traditions. And it is through the uncomfortable shouting matches of protests that we inch closer and closer to truth. A democracy that demands superficial harmony is no democracy at all. Real unity, if it is to be achieved, must come from the acknowledgment and eventual resolution of deep divisions, not the censorious suppression of them.

The problem with efforts to promote civil discourse on campuses is that they fundamentally misunderstand the nature of courage in discourse. Courage is not the absence of conflict or the ability to speak without fear of consequences. Courage, in the context of free speech, is the willingness to say what you believe to be true, even in the face of those consequences, knowing that you might lose friends or get a worse grade on a paper. It is the willingness to accept that your words may provoke anger and hostility and to speak anyway. But this courage must also extend to those who listen. It takes courage to hear these ideas that challenge our deeply held beliefs, to engage with those ideas honestly, and to respond in a way that reflects our own truth.

The current crisis on college campuses, then, is not just about free speech in the legal sense. It is about the failure to cultivate courage in speech—and in listening. Too often, we focus on these meaningless and superficial aspects of dialogue: ensuring that discussions are polite, that debate remains within the bounds of civility, and that controversial speakers are given platforms without facing the consequences of their audience. But this approach does nothing to foster real intellectual growth or to prepare us for the messy, often contentious truth of the real world.

If we are serious about preserving free speech on college campuses, we must move beyond the extremely facile language of civility and instead embrace the messiness and conflict that come with uncivil discourse. We must recognize that the pursuit of truth in a democratic society requires not just the right to speak but the courage to do so in a way that is unadulterated, unapologetic, and often divisive. Only then can we hope to cultivate the kind of intellectual and moral courage that is so desperately needed in today's world. So no, there are no occasions where ethical, religious, or manneristic considerations should outweigh the intellectual gains afforded by free expression.

In this pursuit, organizations like the Buckley Institute must recalibrate their focus. Rather than attempting to police audience reactions or ensure that speakers are met with civility, their mandate should be to embolden speakers and audiences alike to embrace the discomfort that comes with real dialogue. True free speech is not safe; it is challenging, provocative, and often

uncomfortable. But it is in that discomfort that we find the seeds of progress and the potential for truth in a democracy.