Chapter 1: Free Speech and Inclusive Learning Communities

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During my lengthy academic career, the higher education sector has witnessed significant disruption and change—from violent protests over what were believed to be unjust wars, to the desegregation of Southern colleges and universities, to affirmative action challenges decided by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Yet higher education’s recent propensity to disinvite speakers who are controversial, or with whom we don’t agree, is tearing our campuses apart.

During the past several years, from Middlebury, Vermont to Columbia, Missouri to Berkeley, California, colleagues I know and respect have been blindsided by ugly demonstrations on their campus grounds. In fact, most presidents (myself included) have been forced to confront bullies who aim to restrict the very freedoms they claim to cherish.

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As institutions dedicated to teaching and learning, our mission is to stand up to this dangerous brand of civic chicanery. Yet how do we do so, when our conversations on race, religion, gender,
and politics so often turn embittered? How can we use our nation’s growing diversity to foster meaningful conversations about inclusivity, social justice, and equality? And how do colleges and universities best support one another to ensure that we can continue to graduate students who will find a better way forward?

Welcome the Debate
This past year, the University of Richmond invited Karl Rove, political strategist and former Deputy Chief of Staff to President George W. Bush, and Jose Antonio Vargas, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and immigration advocate, to campus to share their perspectives on U.S. immigration policy. They were participants in our Sharp Viewpoint Lecture Series that presents competing views on topics crucial to our nation and global society.

Mr. Vargas shared his remarkable personal story as an undocumented immigrant, including how he learned that his green card was fake when he went to obtain a driver’s license at age 16. He championed a bipartisan plan of action and challenged the audience to view immigration as more than just an issue of policy and politics, but of humanity.

During his question and answer period, we asked Mr. Rove what advice he would give Mr. Vargas, and undocumented Americans like him, who seemingly have no pathway to legal citizenship. Mr. Rove gave a similarly heartfelt (and perhaps surprising to some) answer, suggesting immediate bipartisan action through a five-part plan that included DACA concessions, some form of border wall, and a legal—yet fair—pathway for those who are educated, law-abiding, and contribute to the nation’s economy.

Given recent public turmoil over invited speakers on American campuses, we were prepared for these visits. We had a detailed security plan in place, additional (and plain-clothed) officers, and space set aside for protestors. At the start of our program we held up the right of free expression, yet were prepared to remove anyone who restricted the rights of others to listen and to learn. There were no public outbursts.

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When we welcome speakers espousing all viewpoints into our classrooms and lecture halls, we must fearlessly defend their right to be there and trust that the risk is worth the reward. Usher them through the front door, so to speak, prepare to be surprised, and celebrate the debate while holding everyone (including the speakers) accountable for their words and actions.

Parse the Data
Students, it turns out, want the opportunity to hear different perspectives. In a 2017 poll released by FIRE (the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education), a majority of students (93%) agree that colleges and universities should host a variety of speakers on campus. Yet 69% of those queried also believe that “a speaker’s invitation should be withdrawn if the speaker has made racist or hateful comments.” Students who identified as Democratic were “19 percentage points more likely than their Republican peers” to believe that there are times when a speaker should be disinvited.
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I was also surprised, and perhaps a little saddened, to learn from a 2018 Gallup poll supported by the Knight Foundation that 37% of college students believe that shouting down speakers is acceptable “at least sometimes.” I candidly wish that number was smaller because I believe that much of the fervor surrounding our First Amendment discussions begins with our inability to let people speak—freely and uninterrupted. As Nicholas Kristof of The New York Times recently wrote: “Civility is not a sign of weakness, but of civilization.”

Another point of concern is that just 46% of students participating in the FIRE survey understand that hate speech is protected by the First Amendment, and 31% of all respondents think it should not be protected. Nearly half (45%) of students “identify speech with a racist component as hate speech.” Furthermore, students are much more willing to listen to statements with which they disagree (59%) than statements they find offensive (35%), hurtful (28%), or racist (21%).

Students’ feelings on self-expression vary by political affiliation. In the Gallup poll, 92% of students said they believed that political liberals could “freely and openly” express their views on campus while only 69% of students said that conservatives enjoyed such freedoms. Overall, 61% of students, a sizable majority, said that campus climate prevented some people from speaking freely. In the current climate, it appears that those most likely to be silenced are those possessing politically conservative viewpoints.

These data should be alarming to us. Not because of the political story they tell, but because of the limitations they suggest on our capacity for robust and multifaceted campus dialogue.

**Embrace the Academic Mission**

We need to use these data, and this moment, to teach—about First Amendment protections, the difference between hate and offensive speech, viewpoint diversity, and the characteristics of legal and civil demonstration.

We know that students learn best when they’re challenged to tackle hard questions and when they’re taught to have these conversations in thoughtful ways. Colleges and universities are uniquely positioned, and have an explicit responsibility, to model substantive disagreement and dialogue that fosters change. To give students information they can take into the classroom, living room, workplace, and voting booth.

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I often share with students a story about my own experience with offensive language. Nearly two decades ago, as dean of a school of music, I visited the CEO of a successful company to talk about funding for violin scholarships. We had barely finished shaking hands when the words came out of his mouth: “I had no idea you were black.”
His salutation stopped me in my tracks. This wasn’t the way I expected to begin a conversation about financial assistance for talented string players or any other topic. So, I paused and listened as my host wondered aloud why there were so few string players of color (I happen to play the cello professionally), and how the classical arts community could better recruit artists from all backgrounds. In reply, I spoke passionately about our programs and offered my enthusiasm for one of our students who, just a few years later, won a coveted position in the viola section of the Cleveland Orchestra.

This enthusiastic exchange of ideas quickly overshadowed my initial shock at how our conversation had begun. I shudder to think how differently the meeting may have gone had I responded immediately, or not at all.

Over the years, student reactions to this story have changed. I’ve recently noticed, as the aforementioned data suggest, that students are alarmed by speech they perceive to be racially offensive. I use this moment to probe, question, and teach. What specifically do you find offensive? How would you have responded to his remarks? How could the CEO have initiated this conversation in manner that was less offensive to you?

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Meaningful understanding—honored through unexpected or uncomfortable experiences—happens every time we open ourselves to someone who is different from us, whether because of ethnic background, sexual orientation, wealth, religious belief, political affiliation, or ideology. For this to happen, we must commit ourselves to teaching and listening, even when what we hear knocks us off-balance. These conversations may not always be easy, but they will be educational; they will challenge us to broaden our minds and perspectives.

Follow the (Student) Leaders
At the University of Richmond, we pursue opportunities to create interactions like these every day. Our academic programs expose students to new ideas and ways of thinking, and our small classes enable faculty members to engage students directly in the complexity of problems and the benefit that new perspectives bring to understanding. More than 60% of our students participate in study abroad programs, bringing fresh perspectives back to campus when they return. Through living-learning communities and interdisciplinary academic programs such as Integrated Qualitative Science and Philosophy, Politics, Economics, and Law, students learn to connect disparate disciplines—and their competing views of the world—to advance knowledge.

Two of the five pillars of our new strategic plan aim to improve Access and Affordability, and create a Thriving and Inclusive Community, and we are soon launching a University-wide ethics initiative through our Jepson School of Leadership Studies to ensure students are prepared to make responsible choices in their lives after graduation.

Students, as well, bring much to the proverbial table. This past fall, after violence erupted at the University of Virginia, leaders of our Democratic and Republican student organizations
convened a faculty forum to discuss racism, bigotry, and violence and held a student-led discussion panel the following day to reflect on what they heard. Concomitantly, our student government leaders initiated a year-long listening tour of students focused on campus climate and released a candid and thorough report in the spring. Students are actively participating on the President’s Advisory Committee on Making Excellence Inclusive and contribute valuable scholarly work to our Race & Racism Project.

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The problems we face are knotty and complex, and addressing them effectively will require more perspectives, not fewer. Our students are technologically savvy and globally aware, but statistically less open to free expression. The university campus provides an ideal environment to show them how to learn from the rich diversity that exists here, rethink a position, or stay up late debating an issue back and forth with classmates—solving the world’s problems emboldened by youth, pizza, and caffeine.

Indeed, this is the purpose of higher education: to interrogate truths, support arguments with fact and reason, uncover new knowledge, and create greater understanding. Anyone with a voice and an opinion can shout down a speaker. But listening (and learning) requires patience, empathy, and intellect—the building blocks of civility.

If we hope to respect First Amendment freedoms, strengthen our democracy, and prove our value to an increasingly skeptical public, we need both sides of each argument to find common ground and respect the diversity of perspectives and backgrounds that color these opinions.

At a moment when people increasingly choose echo chambers over challenging conversations, we have to remind our students, ourselves, and the public at large that higher education’s purpose is to question received wisdom and look at problems through a wide lens. That is why free expression and inclusivity are core values of the 21st century academy. Our goal is not agreement or conformity, but the energetic exchange of ideas among an energetic and diverse community of scholars.

Meaningful progress rarely comes without challenges; engaged citizenship is complicated. We must continue to invite speakers who will spawn debate and celebrate institutions that take risks and bravely defend the rights of all to speak freely.

The world our students will enter after graduation is replete with such struggles and difficult discussions. As campus leaders, we have a duty to lead by example and prepare them for the exercise.