

Free speech on campus

Some philosophical reflections

Narrowing our focus

We'll focus on questions about free speech on **college and university campuses** – not (e.g.) on Facebook, etc.

One reason: colleges and universities are small and close-knit communities; so rules and (especially) **norms** about speech have a greater chance of gaining purchase.

We'll narrow our focus further, focusing on the **educational community** (as opposed to the research community).

The better way into our topic

Forget about “cancel culture” etc.

Focus instead on this question: What is the **point** of colleges and universities? Why should a well-functioning society **have** them?

Answers we'll **set aside**:

- production of knowledge and understanding
- preparing young people to do what we nerdy academics do
- preparing young people to be good little capitalist worker-bees
- credentialling

What the experts say

Carleton:

Carleton College is committed to providing a true liberal arts education—a curriculum that challenges our students to learn broadly and think deeply. Instead of training for one narrow career path, Carleton students develop the knowledge and skills to succeed in any walk of life.

The most important thing our students gain is how to learn for a lifetime. Critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, effective communication: these are the tools that transform a collection of facts and figures into a way of understanding the world.

What the experts say

Harvard:

The mission of Harvard College is to educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society. We do this through our commitment to the transformative power of a liberal arts and sciences education.

Beginning in the classroom with exposure to new ideas, new ways of understanding, and new ways of knowing, students embark on a journey of intellectual transformation. Through a diverse living environment, where students live with people who are studying different topics, who come from different walks of life and have evolving identities, intellectual transformation is deepened and conditions for social transformation are created. From this we hope that students will begin to fashion their lives by gaining a sense of what they want to do with their gifts and talents, assessing their values and interests, and learning how they can best serve the world.

What the experts say

Williams:

In the gentle light of the Berkshire hills, Williams pursues a bold ambition: To provide the finest possible liberal arts education. If the goal is immodest, it is also bracing: Elevating the sights and standards of every member of the community, encouraging them to keep faith with the challenge inscribed on the College's gates: "climb high, climb far."

What the experts say

Swarthmore:

Swarthmore College provides learners of diverse backgrounds a transformative liberal arts education grounded in rigorous intellectual inquiry and empowers all who share in our community to flourish and contribute to a better world.

What the experts say

Reed:

Reed College is an institution of higher education in the liberal arts devoted to the intrinsic value of intellectual pursuit and governed by the highest standards of scholarly practice, critical thought, and creativity. Its undergraduate program of study, leading to the degree of Bachelor of Arts, is demanding and intense and balances breadth of knowledge across the curriculum with depth of knowledge in a particular field of study. The goal of the Reed education is that students learn and demonstrate rigor and independence in their habits of thought, inquiry and expression.

The surgeon

Here is a little story (it may be familiar):

A father and his son are involved in a horrific car crash, and both are rushed to the hospital. When the child is brought into the operating theatre, the surgeon stops short and says: “I can’t operate on this boy, he’s my son”.

How can this be?

Miller Larsen's insight

Here is Elís Miller Larsen (philosopher at Harvard):



Miller Larsen's insight

Here is her key insight:

There is a kind of ignorance that consists **not** in a mere lack of knowledge, but in **overlooking a possibility**. Ignorance, in other words, is a kind of **cognitive blindspot**.

Understanding the **nature, sources, and consequences** of this kind of ignorance is critically important to epistemology.

Our takeaway: unlike (most) mere lack of knowledge, this kind of ignorance has profound effects on inquiry.

Roughly: to the extent that we are unable to **diagnose, guard against, and combat** ignorance, we will be much **worse inquirers**.

Varieties of ignorance

Two ways to ignore a possibility:

- fail to notice it
- fail to take it seriously

Individuals can be ignorant (obviously!). But so can **groups**.

- One way: every member of the group is ignorant of the given possibility.
- Another way: social forces within the group prevent that possibility from being taken up in group-level reasoning.

Ignorance **of ignorance** is both possible, and fiendishly difficult to spot.

- Think of some group that is ignoring some possibility.
- Now hit **pause**: was it **your** group?

Two mechanisms of production

At the **individual** level: threat-avoidance

Case 1: **You** make me feel threatened, by doing something that manifests hostility toward me.

One reasonable response: I'll **avoid** you!

Case 2: **Your idea** makes me feel threatened, even though you manifest **no** hostility toward me.

Avoiding **you** isn't going to help. What else might?

- Avoiding your idea!
- Or: dismissing it out of hand.

Either way, I've responded to the threat by making myself (more) ignorant.

Two mechanisms of production

At the **group** level: anathematizing (ignorance as a **policing mechanism**).

What does membership-in-good-standing in my group **require**?

Perhaps: that I be ignorant of the **possibility that p** (either by overlooking it, or by dismissing it).

It is **anathema** to ask, “Could p be true?”

It is **anathema** to ask, “Why is it anathema to ask whether p could be true?”

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Anathema all the way down! The group-level ignorance **protects itself**.

One mechanism of defense

The cultivation of a particular virtue can help: **curiosity**.

At the individual level:

- I can strive to be curious about **what I'm missing**.
- I can strive to be curious about an **idea I find threatening**.
- I can strive to be curious about **why** I find some idea threatening.
- I can strive to **not** automatically treat those who disagree with me as **SED** (**S**tupid, **E**vil, or **D**eranged).

At the group level:

- We can cultivate norms that encourage the virtue of curiosity.
- We can set up structures designed to bring overlooked possibilities to our attention.
- We can reward successful heresy.

Back to college

One common thread we can now tease out of the mission statements:

A liberal arts education should aim to equip students with the skills, knowledge, and habits of mind needed to **diagnose, guard against, and combat ignorance**, both in themselves and in the groups to which they do or will belong.

That's surely not all! (For example, you should also learn some stuff.)

But it's a very important part – and is an important reason why a well-functioning society **needs** institutions that provide such an education.

Back to college

With this aim in view, we can better think about **why** free speech on campus matters – and **what kinds** matter.

Here a distinction from the philosopher Teresa Bejan will help.



Two freedoms ...

Bejan distinguishes between

Parrhesia: Freedom from fear of retaliation for one's speech.

Isegoria: Standing to have one's speech be heard and engaged with.

- Note: “engaged with” **doesn't** just mean “responded to somehow or other”; it requires that one's ideas be **taken seriously**, ideally in a spirit of genuine **curiosity** about their merits.

These freedoms are quite **different** – indeed, **logically independent** of each other!

In a well-functioning classroom setting, it will be common knowledge that all members enjoy **both** of them.

... and one responsibility

That's not quite enough. A well-functioning classroom should also feature

Commitment to the collective aim: Our contributions should try to further what we are trying to jointly accomplish.

- Ideally, “what we are trying jointly to accomplish” should **include:** help each other get better at diagnosing, guarding against, and combatting ignorance.

When

- both freedoms are in place, and
- this shared commitment is in place,

then

- classroom conversation becomes a **powerful anti-ignorance tool.**

Zooming out a bit

In the ideal college or university setting, the “classroom”, in the **relevant** sense, won’t just be **the classroom**.

It should extend to every setting in which serious conversation happens.

We are **far** from that ideal.

Why?

Why it's difficult: limits to rules

Can't a college or university just **lay down rules**?

Sure.

- Some are a really good idea (e.g. the Chicago Principles).
- Rules like this can help safeguard parrhesia, at least to some extent.
- They can also serve as a valuable reminder that in **one** sense, college is **supposed to be unsafe**. (But for **everyone** – not just for **some**.)

But rules **can't possibly suffice**.

- Parrhesia can still be compromised.
- They **can't help** with isegoria or shared commitment – and both of these are essential.

Why it's difficult: building norms

What's needed, in addition, are strong **norms**.

Building these

- needs to be **bottom-up**, not **top-down**;
- requires patience;
- should involve equal input from all stakeholders;
- demands a high degree of emotional awareness, emotional intelligence, and emotional self-regulation on the part of **everyone**.

A vision worth aiming for

A daunting task.

But worth aiming at. For think about what we **gain**, if we make it even **part-way**:

- an institution that does a much better job of performing what is, for society at large, one of its most essential functions;
- a college environment that makes full use of its internal diversity;
- students better equipped with skills they will need both to flourish in and to contribute to a multi-cultural society;
- a – frankly – vastly more joyful college experience, for all parties.

For short: we should learn to treat disagreement **not as a threat** but **as an opportunity** – as the raw material out of which we collectively shrink our ignorance and grow our wisdom.