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Nate Feltman: Defend free speech on college campuses

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NATE FELTMAN
COMMENTARY

The First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech. The amendment states in relevant part that “Congress shall make no law ... abridging freedom of speech.” Of course, there are court-recognized limits to free speech, including defamation, incitement to imminent lawless action and solicitations to commit crimes.

Today, on many college campuses, freedom of speech is under attack. Rather than invite vigorous debate on how we solve some of society’s most challenging problems, many school administrators have been quick to bow to faculty and student voices that wish to silence opinions that do not conform to their own. While that might ease tensions in the short run, the underlying causes of inequality and racism are left unaddressed.

The free exchange of ideas is vital to an open and free society, and a free society depends on informed and engaged citizens. Even unpopular, offensive speech, or speech that offends our morality, must be protected in order to advance knowledge and learning. Civil discourse that includes diverse points of view and constructive disagreement is fundamental to a society that values diversity, innovation and a knowledgeable citizenry.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson wrote about the importance of protecting freedom of speech in our educational system in 1943: “That they are educating the young for citizenship is reason for scrupulous protection of constitutional freedoms of the individual, if we are not to strangle the free mind at its source and teach youth to discount important principles of our government as

mere platitudes.” In other words, if we teach the youth that suppressing free speech on campus is acceptable, what other constitutional rights might be up for suppression?

RealClearEducation, in collaboration with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, recently released its 2021 College Free Speech Rankings. According to the surveyors, this is the largest free speech survey on American college campuses ever conducted—more than 37,000 students responded. The survey measured openness to discussing challenging topics on campus, tolerance for allowing both liberal and conservative speakers on campus, administrative support of free speech, comfort expressing ideas, protest acceptability and written speech code.

Indiana’s top free speech school is Purdue, at No. 6 in the nation. Worst in the nation for free speech is DePauw University (154th) for the second year in a row. IU comes in at 75th, Notre Dame at 126th.

Purdue’s rank is no surprise with President Mitch Daniels at the helm. In 2015, Purdue adopted a free speech code modeled on the University of Chicago’s principles—the first public university to do so. Purdue’s Presidential Lecture series has hosted luminaries from across the political spectrum to engage students with global thinkers. And Daniels established the Cornerstone program, which provides every student 15 hours of literature, history and liberal arts courses to provide students an opportunity to be grounded in the humanities.

Unfortunately, Daniels’ work is the exception rather than the rule. The survey found more than 80% of college students indicate that they self-censor in the classroom and on their campuses due to the potential repercussions of exposing their actual views.

Constitutional rights must be defended, especially at the institutions training our next generation of leaders. Taking steps to reinvigorate free speech on campuses is a critical component in diminishing today’s polarization and toxic political environment. University presidents, trustees, alumni, donors and parents should demand tolerance for all viewpoints and encourage civil and constructive debate. •

Feltman is CEO of IBJ Media. To comment, email nfeltman@ibj.com.

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