RA – Weiss

Protests have erupted on university campuses across the country. To many, these students are speaking out against racial injustice that has long been manifested in unwelcoming, sometimes hostile environments. But to critics, their demands have gone too far, creating an atmosphere of intolerance for opposing or unpopular points of view. Are the protestors silencing free speech, or are they just trying to be heard? And are the universities responding by defending free speech, or by suppressing it?

**Where Do You Stand?**

**For The Motion**

* Protesters are shouting down those they disagree with and demanding protection from views they find offensive.
* Certain topics have been labeled off the table for discussion, leaving no room on campuses for diverse or unpopular ideas.
* While some of the issues being protested are legitimate concerns, students have gone too far with their demands.

**Against The Motion**

* Rather than closing down speech, the protests have spurred productive discussions about race and diversity on campuses.
* The protests are not hypersensitive reactions to discrete events, but a response to long-simmering tensions and hostile environments.
* By mobilizing for ideas they believe in, these students are not catastrophizing—they are exercising their right to free speech.

# #1. The Problem With Echo Chambers on Campus and Beyond

[*Bryan Stascavage*](http://wesconnect.wesleyan.edu/s/1318/index.aspx?sid=1318&gid=1&pgid=5165&cid=9123&ecid=9123&crid=0&calpgid=5157&calcid=9115&ref=byline)*, an Iraq War veteran, is a sophomore at Wesleyan University. He is on*[*Twitter*](https://twitter.com/bstas10)*.*

I think the unwillingness to have uncomfortable discussions at college is a recent development of the growing polarity in our society. And the effect of this polarity is pointing to the creation of stovepipes of thought, in which knowledge of valid opposing ideas has waned.

College campuses are not alone in this development. The stovepipes of thought have set up echo chambers where the range of acceptable discussion is narrow. Gun-toting right wingers? There is a round-the-clock source of information for those viewers, where all news is conveniently presented and analyzed to fit their world view. Liberal environmentalists have their own feed of filtered information.

Not only that, but a relatively small yet vocal and active group can sanitize discussion in those echo chambers by aggressively targeting dissenters, pressuring them to convert or leave. A salient example is the reaction at Wesleyan to [my article on Black Lives Matter](http://wesleyanargus.com/2015/09/14/of-race-and-sex/). Instead of engaging in discussion, a [small group](http://wesleyanargus.com/2015/09/21/petition-demands-defunding-of-argus/) targeted the student newspaper for publishing an unpopular opinion.

Students are developing this idea further. Instead of being content with their own sanitized echo chambers, they are extending their worldview to the surrounding environment. These vocal activists are culturally terraforming the environment around them, using public shaming and soft threats as their means to keep voices they disagree with in check. The evidence of aggressive targeting by these activists already exists. [Speakers have been uninvited](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/nyregion/rice-backs-out-of-rutgers-speech-after-student-protests.html?_r=1), [comedians have sworn off performing at campuses](http://www.salon.com/2015/06/10/10_famous_comedians_on_how_political_correctness_is_killing_comedy_we_are_addicted_to_the_rush_of_being_offended/). This is cultural terraforming in action.

When they graduate, they will take these values to their respective industries. And if the recent [upheaval surrounding my college newspaper](http://www.thecollegefix.com/post/24314/) is foreshadowing, the news media industry may have a problem on its hands.

The end result will be even more polarization in America, with societal fault lines growing increasingly contentious and unproductive.

# #2. Today’s Students Have a New Way of Looking at Free Speech

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College students today hold a range of views on free speech. Some adhere to a strict interpretation of the First Amendment: All speech must be free. Others assert that free speech is not truly available to all, especially members of marginalized groups. For these students free speech is a nuanced concept because, in the words of the University of Baltimore law professor Garrett Epps,[“Repressing speech has costs, but so does allowing it.”](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/free-speech-isnt-free/283672/)

At my campus, an appointed group of faculty, staff, students, alumnae and trustees spent last year assessing the challenges of discourse. They found that, counter to the idea that today’s students fear opposing perspectives, most students want their college to be a place where uncomfortable ideas can be debated openly. Further, most agreed that we don’t have the right not to be offended, although we do have an obligation to learn what offends.

Parents who marched for civil rights or protested the Vietnam War during their own college years will know from experience why free speech matters. The lessons some of us learned during those years opened our eyes and often set us on our life course. In their own development as activists and leaders, students today are navigating the added complexities of online discourse, in which the ability to comment anonymously can be simultaneously liberating and destructive, giving voice not only to offensive ideas but to ad hominem attacks, and, in some cases, harassment. Perhaps this is one of the reasons today’s students are interested in the boundaries of free speech. As a society, we will benefit from the conversation they are fostering.

Sometimes we are changed by debate; always, we are tested. Other times we are not changed because our opinions reflect a moral certainty on matters of importance to us; our deeply held beliefs are linked with our identities. Still, this does not mean that we cannot disagree openly about any issue, and when we do we must counter argument with more argument. Consensus should not be the goal – even about free speech.

# #3. The Importance of Protecting Even the Thoughts We Hate

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The Supreme Court’s decisions “protect the freedom to express” even “the thought that we hate” — including “discriminatory” viewpoints expressed by student groups at public universities. So wrote [Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg](http://www.biography.com/people/ruth-bader-ginsburg-9312041), no stranger to fights for equality but also a strong supporter of the freedom of speech. This came in her majority opinion in [Christian Legal Society v. Martinez (2010)](https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=10772194664096336702&as_sdt=2006#[26]), but the dissenters agreed on this.

And the reason for this understanding of the First Amendment is clear: As the court wrote in a [1972 college student speech case](https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=3830023126010937654&as_sdt=2006#p188) (quoting [Justice Hugo Black](http://www.biography.com/people/hugo-black-37030)), First Amendment protection “must be accorded to the ideas we hate or sooner or later they will be denied to the ideas we cherish.”   
  
One way that speech restrictions often grow is through what I call “censorship envy.” Say one group wins a ban on speech that it finds offensive. It’s human nature for other groups to then ask: What about speech that offends us — harsh criticism of Israel, or of certain religious belief systems, or of abortion, or of America?   
  
Are we second-class citizens, whose feelings can be insulted with impunity, while other groups are protected? Are we weaklings who lack the power or status that the others have used to suppress the speech they hate? And if we’re not second-class weaklings, we demand the same “protection” from speech that offends us. That’s censorship envy, and it’s a powerful force supporting the growth of speech restrictions, at universities and elsewhere.   
  
Unfortunately, we’re seeing many at universities, including student groups, administrators and even the federal Department of Education, trying to suppress student speech, [again](http://volokh.com/2013/05/13/the-administration-says-universities-must-implement-broad-speech-codes-2/) and [again](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/05/06/more-on-the-university-of-minnesota-charlie-hebdo-controversy-there-are-limits-on-free-speech/) and [again](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2014/10/23/montclair-state-university-student-government-orders-students-for-justice-in-palestine-to-cease-and-desist-political-propaganda/) and [again](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/05/21/youngstown-state-university-administration-not-the-student-government-apparently-took-the-lead-in-removing-straight-pride-posters/) and [again](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/06/25/los-angeles-times-editorializes-against-uc-microaggressions-definitions/) and [again](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/09/16/u-of-californias-proposed-statement-on-intolerance-is-widely-found-intolerable/) and[again](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/10/12/ucla-likely-violating-first-amendment-in-its-reaction-to-kim-kardashiankanye-west-themed-fraternitysorority-party/) -- and the list could go on. Oddly, many of these restrictions come from political groups that see themselves as outsiders fighting the powerful. If that’s really so, how can they give the government extra censorship powers that can so easily be used against future “progressives” like them?   
  
Justice Ginsburg has seen how many civil rights movements succeeded in America, in large part because of their speech and the constitutional protection for such speech. Future movements, from all political positions, need that protection. And they won’t get it if colleges teach students the habits of censorship rather than of freedom.

# #4. Millennials Are Creating a More Inclusive and Just World

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One-third of female students in my graduating class who responded to the Association of American Universities’ [Campus Climate Survey](http://www.brown.edu/web/documents/climatesurvey/Brown_U_Climate_Survey_Report_Westat_2015.pdf) reported being sexually assaulted during college. For these students, sexual violence isn’t a difficult conversation, it’s their life. They are constantly balancing their healing and their education, frequently while navigating a campus that they share with their assailant. It’s unreasonable to expect student survivors to leave their personal experiences at the classroom door. Trauma affects how students learn and academic discussions about trauma and violence should take this into consideration.

Promoting a rigorous academic environment does not mean making space for every idea that pops into a student’s head. Academic discussions make space in conversations to hear from people who have valuable knowledge to contribute. Safer learning environments ensure that students who have experienced violence are able to contribute without putting their experiences up for debate. More inclusive classrooms raise the level of discourse and nuance in academic conversations by promoting the free speech of student survivors, allowing others to learn from their experiences. Widespread campus sexual violence hurts entire campus communities and those communities should have an obligation to respond and support survivors in their healing and their learning.

There are those who think calling for safer academic environments is [“coddling”](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/)or [“infantilizing”](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/opinion/sunday/judith-shulevitz-hiding-from-scary-ideas.html?_r=1) to students. This view frames student survivors as weak and implies that when they receive support from their community, they are made weaker. Claiming that survivors of sexual violence are overly sensitive is a way of protecting other students from confronting difficult truths about the nature and prevalence of violence on their campuses. Classrooms and campuses that are sensitive to the needs of traumatized students provide opportunities for all students to engage with difficult material, not just those with the privilege of distancing themselves from the topic at hand.

Those who want to frame this issue as an attack on free speech on college campuses are ignoring the reality of campus sexual violence. Requests for safe spaces or trigger warnings are not about hiding from ideas but about finding ways to engage without disturbing the people most directly affected. Students are not avoiding or silencing difficult conversations, they’re learning to face them in ways that are both academically rigorous as well as sensitive to the needs of everyone in the room. Through these discussions, they are becoming a generation of leaders ready to create more inclusive and just world.

“Sometimes, change is good, and these kids deserve to be heard. But the demands of student activists have increasingly taken an Orwellian bent—and, if met, would eviscerate the free speech rights of faculty members, campus visitors, and even other students.”

Based on what you know now, do these demands seem reasonable? Or have students gone too far?