Political Correctness and the Problems for Academic Freedom

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Laughing at the wrong joke could cost a man his life during the crazy reign of Emperor Nero.

Scroll back to the year 65, or thereabouts. Upon making a gastrointestinal noise (let us call it farting), in one of Rome's public latrines, the poet Lucan quoted a verse that Nero himself had proudly composed on the breaking of thunder. The reaction was something that only Monty Python could imagine—and yet it actually happened. Romans scrambled to put on their togas and get out of the potty, lest a tattling informer find them smiling and charge them with treason. Hilarious, except the executions and forced suicides were not.

Nowadays "inappropriate laughter" may not be a problem in public latrines, but any number of politically incorrect observations can bring blacklisting, disinvitations, and other punishments on our college campuses.

Campus sensitivities are on high alert. And the topics that are potentially offensive—and increasingly off limits—are growing—and growing fast.

You've heard the term—disinvitation season. This is part of that phenomenon. Choosing a campus speaker used to be about hearing from a distinguished person, often someone who had taken a controversial stance. But not anymore. On the politically correct campus, students and faculty now are less interested in hearing a challenging perspective than they are in what the *Huffington Post* has called "freedom from unpalatable speech—or more typically, what is perceived to be distasteful to a few."

Former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice had to bow out of speaking at Rutgers after students protested she was a war criminal. Brandeis University invited human rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali to speak and receive an honorary degree—and then rescinded the invitation over student protest. Azusa Pacific University invited scholar Charles Murray to give a talk (not even a commencement address), then backed out because Murray, an eminent American social scientist, was too controversial. Christine Lagarde, first female head of the International Monetary Fund, was invited to address Smith's graduating class only to back out after students protested her support of imperialist and patriarchal systems.

On the PC campus, shouting down a controversial voice is not seen as an evil, but a virtue. A small group of close-minded students and faculty is all that is needed to cut off discussion on the grounds that their view—the correct view—is the only view.

Warning! Trigger Warning!

This speech may contain traumatic subject matter for those who believe our colleges and universities have an obligation to foster a robust exchange of ideas in the pursuit of truth.

It wasn't always so.

Back in December 1820, as he founded the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson laid out the foundation of academic freedom. "[The University] will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind," he wrote. "For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."

Again, in 1859, John Stuart Mill outlined the matter eloquently: "The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race, posterity, as well as the existing generation, those who dissent from the opinion still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose what is almost as great a benefit: the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error."

And, in 1915, led by John Dewey, the American Association of University Professors issued its seminal "Declaration of Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure," defining academic freedom as a two-way street: students' freedom to learn and faculty's freedom to teach. The professor's business, they wrote, "is not to provide his students with ready-made conclusions, but to train them to think for themselves, and to provide them access to those materials which they need if they are to think intelligently." The professor must be on "guard against taking unfair advantage of the student's immaturity by indoctrinating him with the teacher's own opinion before the student has had an opportunity fairly to examine other opinions."

For many years, there was fairly uniform agreement among academics: nothing is more central to the life of the mind than the robust exchange of ideas. The professoriate resisted—properly—when it was threatened.

Yet, over the last 50 years, the concept of academic freedom has been under attack, and attack from within. In its place has been an academic regime that has regularly put sensitivities and civility first, and free speech last.

While there are many formulations, "political correctness" is the notion that certain areas of life and thought have only one acceptable point of view. In other words, there is no need to search for truth, because the institution has already determined what the truth is. Political correctness has provided the impetus for all-too-many university administrations to punish students, and even faculty members, for expressing certain "offensive" thoughts frequently touching race, gender, sexual orientation, and other hot button contemporary topics. Today, a student or faculty member found to have deviated from the reigning orthodoxy, far from being praised, can find himself ridiculed or even sentenced to sensitivity training—or worse. The PC mentality is alive and well.

As I'll outline in the next few minutes, the PC culture has resulted in the weakening of the core curriculum, the disappearance of academic disciplines and perspectives, the emergence of speech codes, and trigger warnings. The tragic consequences are not only to weaken liberal arts education, but to shortchange students for the future.

The notions of truth and objectivity—the necessary conditions of academic freedom outlined by Jefferson—are regularly regarded as antiquated and an obstacle to social change. In the PC view, all ideas are political, the classroom is an appropriate place for advocacy, sensitivities are to be comforted, and students should be molded into "change agents" to promote a political agenda.

Let's start with college curricula.

At one time, faculty and administrators had the courage to define what is great and what is most important for students to know and be able to do. Students could make some choices, but they started with a largely prescribed general liberal arts curriculum leading to a major that would equip them to partake in the common conversation of well-educated people.

Not anymore.

A major like English today is not so much a body of important writers, genres and works but a hodgepodge of courses reflecting the diverse interests and approaches of the faculty. Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer are no longer required in many places, but "non-canonical traditions," "under-represented cultures," and "ethnic or

non-Western literature" are. Advocacy, therapy, and sensitivity training regularly supplant rigorous intellectual training.

At Union College, students can substitute such courses as "Narratives of Haunting in U.S. Ethnic Literature" for foreign language study. At Wellesley, "Rainbow Cowboys (and Girls): Gender, Race, Class and Sexuality in Westerns" will satisfy the Language and Literature requirement. At UC-Boulder, the U.S. Context requirement may be satisfied by "Horror Films and American Culture." And my favorite, at Elmira College, where the U.S. Culture and Civilization requirement can be met by "Mental Illness in the Media." If you are a freshman at the University of Denver, the first year seminar may be satisfied by taking "Gender, Power, and Pop Culture: Decoding Buffy the Vampire Slayer" —just one of many vampire courses in a growing genre.

While all content is equal, sensibilities are not. At Ohio State University, the course on "Sociology of Asian American Life" is designed to "sensitize students to issues facing Asian Americans." "A Lab of Her Own" at the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs will satisfy the Natural Sciences area requirements while providing students—and I quote—with "Modern concepts of science and mathematics with an emphasis on women's contributions to these fields. … This course will also offer a feminist critique of the traditional methods of science."

At college today, one cannot assume that education is for learning's sake. Learning is directed towards a predetermined conclusion and action. If, for example, you enroll in the social justice minor program of the University of Minnesota and register for "The Color of Public Policy: African Americans, American Indians, and Chicanos of the United States," no need to think in class. The catalog description has already reached a conclusion for you, advising students that they will be introduced to the "structural and institutional conditions through which people of color have been systematically marginalized … " To obtain credit, a student must engage in 30 hours of service learning in social justice organizations as well.

Yes, it is true: in years past, college curricula too often have marginalized minority groups and provided a portrait that failed to outline the complex story that is our past. But in the rush to expand that story, much of the old story has been left behind, leaving students and citizens with only part of the sweeping narrative, and one packed with a tightly-controlled political agenda.

Our survey of more than 1,000 liberal arts colleges around the country finds that a mere 18% expect their graduates to take a broad survey in American history or government. A mere 13% require knowledge of foreign language. A mere 3% require the study of economics. Some students may end up with a rich coherent education that prepares them for life and citizenship. But they will have to find it themselves.

For as little as $200,000 today, students are invited to construct their own curriculum. And that curriculum is often narrow and tendentious. Given this state of affairs, a survey conducted by GfK Roper should come as no surprise. Faced with the challenges of finding a job, recent college graduates lamented in large numbers (70%) the absence of a strong core curriculum and exposure to a broad base of foundational subjects. As one student recounted: "I took a lot of courses; I just wish they had amounted to something."

An even more pernicious byproduct of the PC campus is the veritable disappearance of academic disciplines and perspectives.

KC Johnson, a terrific young historian at Brooklyn College, whose many publications include books published by both Cambridge and Harvard University Presses, and who is also co-author of the book, *Until Proven Innocent*, about the Duke lacrosse case, has studied the challenge to disciplinary diversity caused by political correctness. What he finds is most alarming. In the last generation, he writes, "with accelerating speed … the percentage of professors trained in areas of U.S. history some would deem 'traditional' and others would dismiss as the study of 'dead white men' has plummeted. … [E]ven those who remain in the subfields often have 're-visioned' their topics to make them little more than a permutation on the race/class/gender approach that dominates the contemporary history profession. The result is that even those students who want to encounter courses taught by those trained in U.S. political, diplomatic, constitutional, or military history are unable to do so, with few exceptions." (Happily one of which is OSU.)

None other than former Harvard President Larry Summers has acknowledged this problem, stating that "the threat today is less from overreaching administrations and trustees than it is from prevailing faculty orthodoxies that make it very difficult for scholars holding certain views to advance in certain fields." Pro-Israel scholars, he argues, find no home in Middle Eastern studies and American historians whose "scholarship … celebrates aspects of the American past" too often find themselves pariahs in the field.

The PC culture of sensitivity permeates all of the American academy—and nowhere more deeply than when it comes to campus speech codes and the tribunals that enforce them.

Each year, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education issues a "Spotlight on The State of Free Speech on Our Nation's Campuses." This year, FIRE surveyed over 400 schools and found that nearly 60% maintained severely restrictive "red light" speech codes—defined as "policies that clearly and substantially restrict protected speech." (Only 16 had green.) These policies, as one might imagine, are not called "gag orders" or "censorship policies."

In the PC world, the speech codes come with benign names like anti-harassment policies, anti-bullying policies, policies on tolerance, respect and civility; policies on bias and hate speech; and policies governing speakers, demonstrations, and rallies. Speech codes are not meant to restrict speech; they are meant to ensure tolerance and civility.

You may be surprised but FIRE has determined that Case Western, Kenyon, Oberlin, Ohio University, Shawnee State, Ohio State, University of Cincinnati, University of Toledo, Wright State and Youngstown State all have red light speech codes.

For today's purposes, we'll look at just one, this one at Ohio State. The code begins with a statement: "Sexual harassment is illegal." But, for you lawyers in the room, the succeeding definition is broad, and the distinction between harassment and free speech anything but clear. Prohibited sexual harassment includes "sexual jokes, innuendoes, gestures, unwanted flirtation, advances, or propositions, leering, and any unnecessary, unwanted physical contact." Little did we realize—in those dating days long ago—that an awkward date was in fact cause for litigation.

The federal government has recently put a gun to the head of campuses if they don't regularly and fully report "sexual assault" —including sexual harassment. And, as you can see, applying the policy I just read, young men (and young women) are now at risk of being accused of rape and harassment—and prosecuted on campus by tribunals which need not apply due process—if they simply engage in sexual jokes and unwanted flirtation. The age of Nero? Ask me more about this in the Q and A.

Let's go back to my trigger warning earlier in the speech: Originally used for the mentally ill to help prevent traumatic stress disorder, trigger warnings have now

become the latest rage on college campuses. Student leaders at the University of California-Santa Barbara recently passed a resolution urging university officials to institute mandatory trigger warnings on class syllabi. Professors who offer "content that may trigger the onset of symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" would be required not only to issue advance alerts but also permit students to skip those classes.

Forget free speech. If you don't like what someone says, if it upsets you, you can avoid the subject rather than facing it. If you disagree, shout people down. If you are insulted, throw a fit. Use any means necessary to avoid challenging speech or disagreement. The other person's right to free expression doesn't have any bearing on your right to "protect" the campus from views you don't like or that offend your sensibilities. In this world view, sensitivity and civility are deemed equal to, or, in fact, superior to academic freedom—a point made recently by the Chancellor of UC-Berkeley, thankfully to loud disapproval.

Don't get me wrong. Fostering friendship, solidarity, harmony, and civility are important. But, in the words of scholar C. Vann Woodward, a wonderful man for all you Yalies out there, if we make "the fostering of friendship, solidarity, harmony, civility or mutual respect" the "primary and dominant value" on campus, then we risk "sacrificing [the university's] central purpose," teaching and scholarship.

When I first was approached to give this speech, we explored a number of titles, including "Political Correctness and Its Impact on American Competitiveness." In an important way, this title understood that what happens on our campuses doesn't just stay on our campuses. First Amendment scholar Greg Lukianoff outlines the problem:

> Administrators on campus have been able to convince well-meaning students to accept out-right censorship by creating the impression that freedom of speech is somehow the enemy of social progress. When students began leaving college with that lesson under their belts, it was only a matter of time before the cultivation of bad intellectual habits on campus started harming the dialogue of our entire country.

Indeed, what happens on our campuses profoundly influences what happens in our businesses, in our homes, and in our policymaking. We should all be alarmed. The danger of political correctness is not simply to academic freedom. When students are not empowered to think for themselves, when they are not presented with

multiple perspectives in disciplines or public presentations, when they are led to believe that they should be free from insult and upset, they are being deprived of the education they deserve and all of us are being deprived of the thoughtful citizens, prepared workers, and lifelong learners that our society requires.

Ask most employers, and you'll understand what I mean. They don't blame political correctness exactly, but they do say in large numbers that they are seeing college graduates who cannot think critically, write clearly, and who are historically illiterate. The last two surveys of college graduates conducted by the Department of Education found that a majority of college graduates were unable to compare perspectives in two editorials. Recent surveys conducted for us by GfK, formerly Roper, have found that college graduates could not identify the terms of members of Congress. They did not know that the Constitution provides for the separation of powers. They thought that D-Day occurred at Pearl Harbor.

It is true: knowledge is more than rote learning. But when our colleges allow students to create their own curricula and give a majority "A"s; when courses do not provide a broad sweep of history and the intellectual tools to put political issues into a meaningful context, or when they present a conclusion rather than an exploration; when speech codes suggest that free speech must take a back seat to sensitivities at the risk of sanction, we should not be surprised that our college graduates are not prepared for real life after graduation and indeed choose to impose the same constraints on their fellow citizens. Where does social hygiene end and personal liberty—and privacy—begin?

In research now underway, sociologist April Kelly-Woessner tells me she has found that political intolerance has increased among people graduating from college after 2000. She has found that students have become veritable thought police on campus, accepting speech limitations and speech codes more so than in the past, including banning certain books and controversial people from teaching. "We have taught this generation," she wrote me in an email, "that protecting people's feelings is more important than the search for truth." And while speech codes and other symptoms of the politically correct university were aimed to protect minority groups from harmful speech (we have to be ready to define this) students notably today, she reports, do not discriminate, believing that anyone who says something "offensive" to anyone should be restricted.

In the wake of UC-Irvine students' effort to prevent Israeli ambassador to the U.S. from speaking, former UC System President Mark Yudof explained: "They believed … that constitutional rights were for marginalized groups, not for the

'privileged." These students took it upon themselves to define privilege and they made it clear that Jews were among the privileged. Not poor, not marginalized, not the object of empathy. No need to protect the free speech of Jews. Every reason to silence them … "

In a book entitled *Freedom from Speech*, Greg Lukianoff paints a similarly depressing picture. "The national obsession with punishing jokes, rants, drunken tirades and even deeply held beliefs," he writes, "shows a growing hostility toward free speech as a cultural value. … People all over the globe are coming to expect emotional and intellectual comfort as though it were a right."

And what is a primary cause? American higher education, which has in too many ways supplanted respect for the authority of ideas with the idea of authority.

I am happy to report that ACTA is not so glum. In fact I am pleased to relate some very positive actions in recent days. In late August, a group of distinguished policymakers, faculty, trustees—convened by my organization—came together to demand a different academic culture. The report, *Governance for a New Era*, chaired by Benno Schmidt, who raised this problem long before others, and signed by such luminaries as John Engler, former governor of Michigan and president of the Business Roundtable; Jonathan Cole, former provost of Columbia University; Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University; and Thomas McMillen, former congressman from Maryland and regent of the University of Maryland System, is bold and to the point:

The signatories call upon colleges and universities to put an end to disinvitation, to insist on disciplinary diversity, to ensure a strong core curriculum, and to demand the integrity of the hiring process. It calls on college and university leaders to make clear that a diversity of opinion is essential and that the free exchange of ideas is the bedrock of a rich education. It urges presidents, deans, and faculty to address entering students on academic freedom and free expression—just as we saw expertly done in the powerful welcoming speech of Yale President Peter Salovey this fall.

These leaders state boldly—and I agree—that American universities must return to first principles. They recognize that the dominance of political correctness on our campuses amounts to nothing short of a war on youth, endangering the empowerment and training of our next generation of leaders. They recognize that American higher education has long been the envy of the world. And that it will

continue to be only if true academic freedom returns as a campus value of paramount importance.

I thank you and look forward to Q and A.