

Does Defending Free Speech Matter?

Many are familiar with the rising intolerance of dissenting views. While societally or publicly unpopular opinions may be distasteful, we do ourselves and our fellow humans a tremendous disservice when we fail to engage in dialogue and engage instead in hate, cancellation, and labelling. What we lacked in understanding and perspective was always, historically, supplemented by debate, discussion, and conversation about ideals. In turn, this has helped people to continue to view one another as fellow humans, with individual emotions, separate upbringings, circumstances, and life experiences that have shaped each and every one of us uniquely. When we ask questions and probe to understand a viewpoint, rather than to convince or condemn, we gain a new perspective ourselves. It is not necessarily the same opinion as the other person, but the understanding of how they derived their opinion and that they, too, are human. No person or group of people can be painted with a broad brush and labelled as "something" simply because of a candidate they support or a particular issue they defend. To do so would be prejudicial and disingenuous. To be truly awakened and tolerant, we must tolerate others whose viewpoints are contrary to ours and engage in healthy productive dialogue.

Nobody ever discusses the need for free speech and hate speech laws when they agree with what someone is saying. The First Amendment was not put in place because everyone was guaranteed to agree with each other. The true test of an individual is to challenge themselves, think critically, and allow themselves to face uncomfortable words and opinions with which they may disagree and still be strong enough to respect that another has the right to those words and views. Asking questions, engaging in healthy debate, and seeking perspective indicates intelligence and an awareness outside oneself. Cancelling people and organizations and asking for anything one disagrees with to be shut down is based on individualism and a lack of respect for views of others. Our country was not founded on this and Free Speech is imperative for the continued growth of our educational campuses, our government, and our society. We face a very real threat right now in which humans are afraid to speak up and engage in free critical inquiry and robust intellectual debate. Ideological divides have created such intolerance that speaking up risks doxing, harassment, threats, loss of employment and cancellation to satisfy the public's thirst for "just punishment" for words they disagree with.

The Dean of Students at Harvard, Ronald Sullivan Jr., was left with an unrenewed contract after he served on an unpopular defense counsel. His own defender, Jeannie Gersen of the Harvard Law School, had the following to say: "The core of due process is having a chance to be heard. This is something I tell my students ...hearing people out is the basis of any free society...A chill has descended on our intellectual lives-on the positions we feel free to question and express."

Sullivan wrote:

"Unchecked emotion has replaced thoughtful reasoning on campus. Feelings are no longer subjected to evidence, analysis, or empirical defense. Angry demands, rather than rigorous arguments now guide...policy."

We must defend Free Speech whether we agree with the content or not. Truth is only the perception of such in the absence of all views being presented, defended and debated. What if "your truth" is the one they come after next? Will anyone be left to help defend you?

I disapprove of what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.

Widely attributed to Voltaire

Has your Free Speech been stifled as a student or Faculty or Staff member? Contact The Rudder Association, Inc.

Proud Aggie