

Student Activism Is Integral to the Mission of Academe

Some think protests and politics are beside the point. They're wrong.





THE REVIEW | OPINION

By *Amna Khalid* and *Jeffrey Aaron Snyder*

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“**W**hat upsets me about all the protesting ... It’s making it really hard for people to learn.” So [said](#) the Georgetown University professor Jacques Berlinerblau on a recent *Inside Higher Ed* podcast. Berlinerblau continued:

What we do on a college campus [is] not quite free speech. It’s expert speech. That’s what presidents have to defend, right? A college campus is a place where people are credentialed, they train, they receive doctorates, they are certified by their universities ... The job of a college president is to defend the speech of those professors so that they can convey their knowledge to their students.

Berlinerblau is among a chorus of voices [criticizing](#) campus protests as a distraction from the [core university mission](#) of [truth-seeking](#) and the dissemination of knowledge. Writing in *Forbes*, for example, the American Enterprise Institute’s Frederick Hess [argued](#) that “the historic purpose of campus free speech is not to provide banner-waving protesters with a bucolic backdrop, but to facilitate the unfettered pursuit of truth and understanding in teaching, learning, and research.” He added: “There’s nothing particularly *educational* about the protests, letters, and rallies.” That last point was a recurring theme of the now infamous December 5 congressional hearing at which the presidents of Harvard, MIT, and Penn were witnesses.

The shut-up-and-study crowd ignores the fact that virtually every college and university in the United States has a dual pedagogical mission: the development of students’ critical-thinking skills (via knowledge production and dissemination) *and* the preparation of students to be informed, engaged citizens. The federal judge Kevin Newsom got it right when he wrote, in a

2022 [decision](#), that the “chief mission” of colleges and universities is “to equip students to examine arguments critically and, perhaps even more importantly, to prepare young citizens to participate in the civic and political life of our democratic republic.”

Citizenship has been central to the mission of higher education for [more than a century](#). Today you would be hard-pressed to find a college or university that does not foreground citizenship in its mission statement. The University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, for example, seeks to [develop](#) “leaders and citizens who will challenge the present and enrich the future.” [Teaching](#) students “to be responsible and active participants in civic life” is key to a Georgetown education. At Wellesley, the [mission](#) is “to provide an excellent liberal-arts education to women who will make a difference in the world.” And in the City University of New York system, Bronx Community College [aims](#) to instill in students “the value of informed and engaged citizenship and service to their communities.”

If campuses are meant to be training grounds for citizenship, the crackdowns on student expression by many colleges and universities in the wake of the October 7 terrorist attack are serious missteps. American University [banned](#) all indoor protests for this spring semester. It justified that sweeping policy change in the name of “inclusivity,” [citing](#) events that had made “Jewish students feel unsafe and unwelcome.” In February, Barnard [outlawed](#) all dorm-room door decorations, lest students with “different views and beliefs” feel isolated. A college spokesperson [said](#) the policy change had been made in the interest of “supporting a safe, inclusive community” where all students would “feel welcome.”

Appealing to safety concerns and community belonging, a number of universities, including Columbia, Cornell, and Lehigh, have [tightened](#) their rules for student demonstrations. At least three — Brandeis, Columbia, and George Washington — have suspended their chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine, or SJP. PEN America’s Jonathan Friedman [noted](#) that the failure of those universities to offer detailed justifications for the suspensions has “left the impression that they may be engaging in viewpoint-based censorship, and attempting to deliberately silence pro-Palestinian voices critical of Israel.”

That certainly appears to be the case in Texas, where, just this past week, Gov. Greg Abbott signed an [executive order](#) that singled out SJP for allegedly fomenting antisemitism at the state's public universities. "To address the sharp rise in antisemitic speech," the order directs all Texas higher-education institutions to update their free-speech policies to include the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's [definition](#) of antisemitism. [According](#) to Kenneth Stern, the lead author of the IHRA definition, "it was designed primarily for European data collectors to be able to craft reports over borders and time to measure the level of antisemitism." In a [recent Chronicle interview](#), Stern said he was "alarmed" by its adoption on college campuses because it could be invoked to "censor anyone who criticizes or says something controversial about Israel."

Risk-averse college leaders seem to have forgotten that political protests are designed to ruffle feathers. To [paraphrase](#) the late Harry Belafonte, the whole point of a demonstration is to make a lot of noise and snap people out of their indifference.

The [administrative impulse](#) to avoid controversy at all costs is making a mockery of higher education's avowed commitment to preparing students for citizenship. When rights to free expression are trampled on, students are deprived of the opportunity to practice the hard work of living in community with people who hold diverse views. As Jacob Mchangama, an expert on the history of free speech, has astutely [observed](#), "to impose silence and call it tolerance does not make it so." How will students learn to navigate the sometimes rough-and-tumble world of life in a pluralistic, multicultural democracy? When their future neighbors put up lawn signs with messages they oppose or find offensive, there will be no dean on call to remove them.

Engaging in political protest is an essential part of having your voice heard in a democratic society. It teaches students how to advocate for positions dear to their hearts, when and how to make alliances and compromises, and which strategies and tactics work for effective negotiation. Even those sitting on the sidelines learn something about the issues at hand, while also absorbing the important lessons that public advocacy is complex and contentious — and that living in a free society requires tolerating different points of view.

Since the 1960s, student activism and protest have been a regular feature of campus life. Student activists were at the forefront of the civil-rights movement, [starting](#) with the sit-in campaigns launched by four Black North Carolina A&T students at a Woolworths lunch counter in downtown Greensboro, N.C., in February 1960. The 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement overturned university restrictions on campus political activity and advocacy, “setting the stage,” in the historian Robert Cohen’s [words](#), “for mass student protests against the Vietnam War.”

On May 17, 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered an address on the steps of Berkeley’s Sproul Hall, site of Mario Savio’s famous 1964 “bodies upon the gears” [speech](#). Thanking the students for their involvement in the civil-rights and antiwar movements, King [said](#), “You, in a real sense, have been the conscience of the academic community and our nation.”

Between 1984 and 1986, tens of thousands of students [participated](#) in the anti-apartheid divestment movement, dotting campus greens across the country with shanties to draw attention to the poverty and political oppression of Black South Africans. By the close of the 1985-86 academic-year, some 120 colleges and universities had partly or completely divested from companies doing business in South Africa, including a \$3.1-billion withdrawal by the University of California system.

To be clear, while colleges should have a high level of tolerance for confrontational and disruptive student protests, some basic ground rules must be followed. The targeted harassment of individual members of a campus community is, of course, verboten. So too is the [heckler’s veto](#) — that is, shouting down campus speakers — as happened last month when pro-Palestine student protesters [derailed](#) the University of Michigan’s annual Honors Convocation. It’s also important for students to keep in mind that exercising their free-expression rights does not extend to violating reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions, such as keeping clear of fire exits or prohibiting the use of megaphones in the library.

No matter the college or university, there is no single, unifying set of rules for campus speech. Different regulations and norms apply in different campus contexts. The discourse surrounding campus free speech has been deeply impoverished by a failure to recognize that basic fact.

Inside the classroom, where the main objective is the pursuit of knowledge and the development of critical-thinking skills, civil discourse should prevail. Yelling, ad hominem attacks, and political sloganeering have no place in a college classroom. Classrooms are educational spaces where the principles of academic freedom — particularly evidence-based argumentation and inquiry guided by a professor’s professional expertise — take precedence over no-holds-barred, devil-may-care free speech.

In contrast, the campus quad is more like a public forum. (It really *is* a public forum at public universities, where the First Amendment pertains.) In public spaces on campus, respectful discourse should be encouraged, but top-down [“civility” mandates](#) should be roundly rejected. When students are protesting, we shouldn’t expect their speech to be unfailingly courteous, measured, and polite. There must be room for passion and provocation.

According to Frederick Hess, “the point [of campus free speech] is the freedom to inquire in classrooms, not the freedom to wave banners on the quad.” We reject the notion that the only worthwhile demonstrations on campus are those that take place in science labs. If colleges and universities are genuinely committed to preparing students for citizenship, they must protect their right to protest. Otherwise, how are students going to find their voice?

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OPINION

FREE SPEECH

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