

A Way Back From Campus Chaos

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Protesting the world's wrongs has been a rite of passage for generations of American youth. Yet the students and other demonstrators disrupting college campuses this spring are being taught the wrong lesson — for as admirable as it can be to stand up for your beliefs, there are no guarantees that doing so will be without consequence.

5 The highest calling of a university is to craft a culture of open inquiry, one where both free speech and academic freedom are held as ideals and protest is part of that culture. The constitutional right to free speech is the protection against government interference restricting speech. Therefore, leaders at public universities, which are funded by government, have a heightened duty to respect those boundaries, and open dialogue is essential to the pursuit of learning. In the real world, though, this can
10 get messy, and nuance is required when free speech comes into tension with protecting academic freedom.

Student codes of conduct and other guidelines are meant to relieve some of the tension between free speech and academic freedom. But rules matter only when guardrails are consistently upheld. It's in that enforcement that the leadership of too many universities has fallen short.

15 The point of protest is to break such rules, of course, and campuses should be able to tolerate some degree of disruption. That makes it even more important that school administrators respond when the permissible limits for speech are violated.

During the current demonstrations, a lack of accountability has helped produce a crisis.

It has left some Jewish students feeling systematically harassed. It has deprived many students of
20 access to parts of campus life. The disarray and violence of the past weeks have been escalated by the continued involvement of both the police and external agitators.

A lack of clarity around acceptable forms of expression and a failure to hold those who break those norms to account, has opened up the pursuit of higher learning to the whims of those motivated by hypocrisy and cynicism.

25 For years, right-wing Republicans, at the federal and state level, have found opportunities to crusade against academic freedom, with charges of antisemitism on campus serving as the latest vehicle. Lawmakers in the House recently passed a proposal that would impose egregious government restrictions on free speech. The Senate should reject this effort unequivocally.

The absence of steady and principled leadership is what opened the campus gates to such cynicism in
30 the first place. For several years, many university leaders have failed to act as their students and faculty have shown ever greater readiness to block an expanding range of views that they deem wrong or beyond the pale. Some scholars report that this has had a chilling effect on their work, making them less willing to participate in the academy or in the wider world of public discourse. The price of pushing boundaries, particularly with more conservative ideas, has become higher and higher.

35 Schools ought to be teaching their students that there is as much courage in listening as there is in speaking up. It has not gone unnoticed — on campuses but also by members of Congress and by the public writ large — that many of those who are now demanding the right to protest have previously sought to curtail the speech of those whom they declared hateful.

40 Establishing a culture of openness and free expression is crucial to the mission of educational institutions. That includes clear guardrails on conduct and enforcement of those guardrails, regardless of the speaker or the topic. Doing so would not only help restore order on college campuses today but would also strengthen the cultural bedrock of higher education for generations to come.