

Testimony of Michael Zimmerman
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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to come and speak with you today about the important issue of freedom of speech on college campuses.

I want to begin by making two critical points that are intricately related to the issue at hand. First, I believe that it is important to recognize that racism in American society, both overt racism as well as more subtle but no less important forms of institutional racism, is very real and needs to be addressed.

Second, nothing that anyone might say today should in any way undermine the critical value that colleges and universities play in American society. While these institutions are not perfect and while those of us in the academy as well as those of us who care about these institutions need to take steps to help them improve, higher education has been and remains the single best way for individuals to dramatically improve their socio-economic status. Beyond the personal benefits that accrue to degree holders, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that society is far richer when it is well populated by an educated citizenry.

I have spent much of the last 40 years working at various institutions as a faculty member and administrator promoting the value and power of a liberal arts education. A liberal arts education should teach students how to think rather than what to think, it should teach students how to differentiate facts from opinions, and it should teach students how to articulate their thoughts cogently rather than repeating those of others.

As we have all seen, over the past several years there have been problems on American campuses. Some voices have not been welcomed and others have been violently excluded. Let me say this as clearly as I can: This is wrong and it must stop. But what we don't need is additional legislation to be brought into the mix.

We currently have all the tools we need to fix the problem – if we have the courage to use them. College administrators need the courage to do what is right, to stand for principles rather than expediency, and to risk alienating some in the name of those principles. On campuses where such strong leadership exists, conflict rarely escalates to crisis.

At the same time, rank and file faculty members need to hold their colleagues accountable. The problems we've seen on campuses are not, I am confident, supported by the vast majority of faculty members. In a thoughtful op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* Jacques Berlinerbau, Professor of Jewish Civilization at Georgetown University,

recently made the case that we shouldn't misread the nature of the controversy's occurring on campuses:

[T]he liberal/conservative divide at a typical college—and especially at an elite college—is fairly irrelevant to free speech dust-ups. That's because in American academic culture there exist not two, but three, broad ideological camps and neither liberals nor conservatives are center stage.... In my experience, liberal professors play far less of a role in these incidents than a group we might refer to as the “radical left.” This third camp is composed of a vast, and diverse array of quite serious scholars whose animus towards liberal ideas often exceeds its disdain for conservative ones.¹

For many reasons, though, most faculty members, many of whom who hold liberal views as well as those who hold conservative political views, have opted to remain silent, to censor themselves, and therefore they have ceded control of their institutions to a small but very vocal minority. This silence is understandable, speaking out distracts faculty members from their important work of teaching and scholarship, and it often brings them into conflict with their colleagues.

Asking faculty members to encourage civil discussion and to celebrate a range of voices and perspectives is asking a great deal of them – more than we currently see in our political discourse or across most segments of society. Beyond the walls of the academy, we seem to have devolved into a situation where we believe that winning debating points is more important than considering the ideas that others hold. And we seem to have accepted the perspective that shouting slogans is more meaningful than exploring differences and looking for similarities.

Michael Roth, the president of Wesleyan University, made this point very well in a recent opinion piece in *Inside Higher Ed*. He wrote:

Demonizing people because they have ideas different from your own has always been a temptation, and lately it has become a national contagion. College campuses are not at all immune from it, but this malady is fatal for liberal education. Many people are so accustomed to curated information -- be it from social media feeds or just from one's choice of cable news -- that they have lost the ability to respond thoughtfully to

¹ Jacques Berlinbrau. 30 June 2017. When your next college free speech controversy erupts, don't blame liberals. *Washington Post* (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/06/30/when-your-next-college-free-speech-controversy-erupts-dont-blame-liberals/?utm_term=.80be0fa04fa3)

points of view different from their own. When they are confronted with disagreement, they may feel their “existence is annihilated” or that the person with whom they disagree wants “to make it harder for people like themselves to get on in the world.”²

But if diverse opinions are not celebrated on college campuses, where community members are supposed to traffic in ideas, I doubt that they’ll find any welcoming environment in our society. When we shut out voices, we shut out ideas and there are serious intellectual consequences of such behavior.

Part of the problem we see on college campuses, I believe, stems from a rise in the belief that all knowledge is socially constructed and that there are no absolute truths, or the concept of post-modernism as it is known in academic circles. Why has this idea made such a comeback at this particular point in history? One possibility is that the relentless disparagement many have leveled on disciplines in the humanities, arts and social sciences has led to a backlash. It shouldn’t be surprising that when practitioners see their fields portrayed as useless by those who promote only STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), they push back and it shouldn’t be surprising that the resistance often manifests itself as antipathy toward science.

Although they may not be knowingly promoting a post-modern agenda, those who act as if expertise doesn’t matter are causing great harm. When basic facts are dismissed because they’re unpopular, or the collective voice of the world’s experts on a particular topic, whether it be on climate change or evolution, for example, is dismissed because some might prefer a different conclusion, irrespective of the data, dissension is sown and dialogue is curtailed. The classic, but by no means sole, example of such a perspective was demonstrated by Don McLeroy, at the time the chair of the Texas State Board of Education. After being continually frustrated by scientists and teachers who were promoting the best science education we have rather than the creationism McLeroy wanted taught in Texas, he opined, “Someone’s got to stand up to experts.”

We have seen politicians regularly attacking some academic majors, from anthropology to art history. Despite these negative statements, the data show two things. First, the heads of our country’s largest businesses are interested in hiring broadly trained individuals, regardless of major. They want to employ people who can think critically and communicate well. Studies undertaken on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities on this issue are illuminating.

² Michael S. Roth. 17 July 2017. From Unruly Hearts to Open Minds. Inside Higher Ed (<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/07/17/campus-intellectual-diversity-age-polarization-essay>)

Second, the data on the actual earnings of people with different undergraduate majors is fascinating. Fifteen years after graduation, differences all but evaporate. Education and degree acquisition is what's important rather than the particular discipline that was studied.

When we marginalize certain voices, we all lose. We need to recognize that different disciplines each bring something important to our understanding of the world around us. Privileging some fields of study over others yields a fragmented and incomplete picture. I say this as a scientist. As important as science is, it certainly isn't all there is.

Much of the tension on college campuses today comes from a similar historical silencing of certain voices, voices of the marginalized, voices of people of color, the disabled, those with "non-traditional" sexual orientations, the poor, and many others. As these individuals rightfully try to insert their voices into conversations tensions arise. But these voices deserve to be a part of the conversation.

The comparison between racism, sexism, homophobia and other equally terribly discriminatory behaviors and a lack of appreciation for certain academic disciplines should be seen simply as a metaphor. In the former case, people's lives and their experiences are discounted. Without those voices, conversations are stunted and we all suffer, obviously not equally, but we all suffer.

Similarly, voices from all parts of the political spectrum need to be present but they need to be present in ways that promote dialogue rather than hatred. Having said that, I hasten to add that holding and articulating a different political opinion, even a widely divergent political opinion, is not the same as promoting hate speech or actual hatred. Again, let me turn to Michael Roth, who made this point so very well:

[T]hose attacked as PC shouldn't take the bait and content themselves with labeling anyone who attacks them as racist. Those who point out the dangers of big government, emphasize the needs of national security in an age of terrorism, extol the virtues of family and religion, or defend free speech deserve intellectual engagement -- not insult and irony. Those who support a progressive campus culture make a big mistake if they think they are protecting that culture by insulating it from ideas that come from conservative, libertarian and religious traditions.

The goal has to be to find ways to celebrate ideas, a wide array of ideas, and the people who hold those ideas. But such a celebration requires not only that more voices be at the table but that all of us listen to those voices. Looking beyond oneself, listening to what others have to say, understanding a perspective other than your own, even if you don't agree with that perspective, after all, is what a liberal arts education is all about.

Is there any evidence that such an interchange of ideas can work? I believe that there certainly is. Within the academy, when faculty members teach students how to think rather than what to think, something that the vast majority of faculty members, but unfortunately not all faculty, do so very well, creative, competent and skeptical citizens are created. There's also strong evidence that meaningful dialogue can make a difference outside the academy.

Let me provide you with just one example, but one I know very well. In addition to my role as an academic, I serve as the founder and unpaid executive director of The Clergy Letter Project, an organization of more than 14,700 clergy members from a broad range of religious traditions and from all corners of the United States. This group advocates for a more robust and nuanced understanding of the relationship between religion and science – a topic that has, for centuries, been fraught with tension. By promoting discussion rather than dissension, The Clergy Letter Project has made great strides in helping the public come to grips with these issues. In addition to reaching millions of people with our message and seeing the overwhelmingly positive response members have received, I want to share one additional piece of evidence indicating that a strategy of open dialogue can be both respected and transformational. Positive stories about the efforts of The Clergy Letter Project have run on both NPR and Fox News suggesting that it is possible to reach across the political divide and engage individual in thoughtful exchanges.

So, yes, I believe unreservedly in the transformational power of ideas. But for those ideas to be truly powerful, they have to be fully understood and freely adopted and, in part, that means that alternative viewpoints have to be understood as well. This can only occur when we listen, truly listen to one another, and especially listen to those with whom we disagree. College and university campuses should not be the only place in society where this happens, but they absolutely must be one place where it does.

And I am confident that despite some very public failures, this is exactly what happens on college and university campuses most of the time.