
Regional

Campuses and the freedom of speech trap

In the last few weeks we have heard about an increasing number of incidents on campuses across the nation where politically conservative speakers have been prevented from talking. From Middlebury College in Vermont to the University of California at Berkeley, these cases have something in common: They are giving higher education a bad name.

Some op-ed pieces by liberal authors have criticized these incidents on the basis that they represent a violation of the basic principle of free speech, which is seen as a liberal principle.

Conservative editorialists have used them to attack higher education for being out of control, being a nest of liberalism, and for hypocrisy. They maintain that the freedom of speech, so proclaimed by liberals, is only valid when serving to state liberal values.

Some on the far left say that this is the only weapon the underserved and oppressed have to get back to people in power.

Those on the far right are mobilizing their forces to introduce legislation that will severely curtail the ability of colleges and university to manage their own affairs.

They are all missing the main point. These controversies are being to the larger political arena for the advantage of conservatives and the disadvantage of liberals.

Some liberals forget that not long ago marginalized groups such as lesbians, gays, feminists, people of color, and others were prevented from speaking on campuses.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

By now doing the same to conservative speakers, these liberals are becoming equal to what they have abhorred so much in the past. Suppression of free speech – from any side – is a signature characteristic of totalitarian ideologies.

Conservatives, who feel emboldened from last year's presidential elections, are using the current political climate to advance their agenda, and that is to demonstrate that institutions of higher education need to be "controlled" and that they do not deserve the support of the general public and taxpayers.

One the tactics being employed by campus conservative groups is to invite their ideological allies onto campus as welcomed speakers. In some cases, they have created shadow groups with unsuspecting names to rent spaces and then have used those spaces for hosting events that will be sure to provoke a liberal backlash.

And then, when the backlash takes place, they use the bad publicity to their own advantage.

What has been happening is that many campuses are taking the bait.

This is similar to what neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups do when they organize marches. What they are doing is trying to provoke confrontation so that their profiles can be raised from obscurity to prominence.

One of the basic principles of higher education since its founding period in medieval Europe was that educators were not to be punished for their ideas.

After all, many of those ideas were inconvenient to both the church and the feudal states. That is where the very concept of tenure originated. It was to protect teachers against reprisals for their sometimes unorthodox ideas. Unfortunately, tenure has lost much of its original meaning, and has become more of a labor issue than a protection of freedom of speech.

It's no wonder that conservative groups in Iowa and Missouri have introduced legislation to eliminate tenure in public institutions in those states. They claim that tenure is "un-American," gives faculty rights that almost no other professions have, and sets them apart as a privileged group that they call the "elites."

These attempts to ban tenure are actually the result of a self-inflicted wound caused by academics themselves.

Another self-inflicted wound is what is now happening on many campuses when it comes to freedom of speech. Liberals have appeared as intolerant and obsessed with ideological purity (two of the trademarks of anti-intellectuals) as those they have fought for years, and they are making fools of themselves in the process.

What many of these liberals do not realize is that actions like these are seriously damaging the future of higher education and making colleges and universities a perfect target for anti-intellectual

ideals. A new tactic being employed by some politicians is that of using their power over budgets to de-fund public higher education.

Take, for example, the case of New Mexico, where Gov. Susana Martinez, a Republican, removed all higher-education funding from the state budget. She recently vetoed nearly \$745 million for New Mexico's public colleges and universities, mostly for ideological reasons.

Of course, the situation we are witnessing regarding free speech on campuses is not all the fault of liberal groups.

The leadership of colleges and universities are also to blame.

They feel pressure from both sides and do not know how to react beyond lame apologies for violent incidents.

What they should have realized by now is that the best way to deal with these incidents is by debating ideas in a public forum where civility should be maintained – not by trying to silence specific voices.

By doing so, we are protecting freedom of speech, encouraging critical thinking (a much-needed skill these days), and showing that we are fair. After all, in this new scary world of fake news and "alternative facts," real facts should speak for themselves.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>