

College students' free speech is under attack

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Recently, the topic of free speech on college campuses has sparked a fair amount of conversation. In fact the University of California system faced backlash for holding seminars about avoiding microaggressions; this was the topic of an October discussion held by Southern California Public Radio at the University of California, Irvine.

The issue at hand? Microaggressions versus free speech. Microaggressions according to a University of California memo are "slights, snubs or insults...that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target people based solely on their marginalized group membership."

Greg Lukianoff, the president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education(FIRE), took part in the above discussion. Lukianoff, along with Jonathan Haidt, also wrote a piece for a September 2015 issue of the Atlantic titled "The Coddling of the American Mind."

FIRE is a nonprofit that fights to protect freedom of speech, legal equality, due process, and more on college campuses. Lukianoff has been with FIRE since 2001, and he explained to ATTN: that he has noticed a significant shift in the past couple years. For the majority of his time at FIRE, the organization has had to contend with administrators.

Less often, the organization dealt with professors. And even less often, the organization would deal with students or groups of students, but that has changed recently.

For the past couple years, a large number of the cases FIRE has contended with concern student actions and behavior. In an attempt to protect some students from offensive language and ideas, students have actually begun to restrict speech overall. "I think we've created too many minefields for people to have genuine conversations," Lukianoff told ATTN.

Lukianoff cited several examples of cases where students are taking speech limitations too far. One such example occurred at Ithaca College.

The Ithaca College Student Government Association set up an online system where students could anonymously report other students who were carrying out microaggressions. The system didn't explain what constitutes a microaggression, and thus it created what he considers a dangerous situation.

"When you agree to a situation where saying the wrong thing, which everyone does, particularly in college, means that you're going to be reported to the administration, you've created a situation in which, I think, the wonderful and genuine process of candor just isn't going to happen," Lukianoff said.

FIRE describes this as students getting in trouble for crossing an "invisible line" and explains "one student's microaggression is another's earnest attempt to discuss different life experiences." Such a system could turn students against each other, with free speech being the ultimate victim.

Earlier this year, the University of California system labeled statements like "America is a melting pot" and "America is the land of opportunity" as microaggressions. The school system argues that microaggressions promote a hostile learning environment for marginalized students.

There are many in this camp, and they responded to Lukianoff's article in the Atlantic, stating that his perspective disregards diversity or leaves students feeling unsafe.

Both sides of the argument were on display in a recent Salon article titled "My trigger-warning disaster: '9 1/2 Weeks,' 'The Wire' and how coddled young radicals got discomfort all wrong." In the piece a liberal professor explains a situation where she was teaching a class that focused on controversial films.

Despite her making every attempt to give the class trigger warnings, which is a preface to showing something where you explain any bothersome content it contains, students would tell her the content was offensive and shouldn't be shown in class. The professor eventually reaches the following conclusion.

"If you promote trigger warnings in subjects that are supposed to make you feel uncomfortable, you're basically promoting a culture of extreme privilege," she writes. "I'm pretty sure that the trans women who are being murdered weekly, the black men who are brutalized by police brutality daily, and the neighborhoods in America that are plagued by everyday violence aren't given any trigger warnings."

At Wesleyan University, a conservative student wrote an opinion article for the school's newspaper criticizing some of the tactics used by Black Lives Matter activists.

The paper made it very clear it would publish responses to the article, but students reacted by demanding the paper be defunded and threatened to destroy every copy of the paper they could find. Such an act would be the ultimate form of censorship.

The paper ended up losing \$15,000 in funding, which the university claimed was unrelated. Lukianoff said "a contrarian voice is a good thing in my opinion," and explained newspapers are supposed to publish diverse opinions.

All of this is part of what Lukianoff sees as a troubling trend, where students try so hard to protect each other that they end up losing free speech. "The idea that you can be a fan of pluralism and multiculturalism and then say 'These are the 50,000 rules for how you can talk to each other' means you're immediately having a conflict with your stated goal," he said.

Many students claim this form of control is not technically censorship, because the term censorship is often related to laws passed by the government, but Lukianoff disagrees. "The censorship the First Amendment is concerned with is not only government censorship, and a lot of people don't understand this," he said.

"The government has two main duties in regard to speech, one is it can't censor ... on its own, but the other one people miss is it also has to prevent mobs or angry people from shutting down speech that's otherwise lawfully allowed to happen."

Lukianoff hopes that the trend changes in a way where people simply try to understand what someone is trying to say before making a judgment and attacking them. "Give them the benefit of the doubt first," he said. Instead of assuming someone is a bigot because they said something in a way a student thinks is improper, they can move the conversation forward by understanding the context and the intention behind the statement.

While many of the students who express these concerns believe in free speech and want to be inclusive, they often end up opposing those ideals. Lukianoff said this is common in history.

"Attempts at 'enlightened censorship' are actually historically the norm," he said. "There's a kind of historical censorship gravity that's always pulling us back toward our natural inclination to want to shut up voices that make us feel unpleasant, that challenge our world views, that make us less certain and fill us with doubt, or worst of all, fear ... I do think what's peculiar in human history are open societies—societies where they engage in discussion."

He said most societies in history have ostracized those who don't conform to the norm in the name of a more proper and civil lifestyle.

Lukianoff also criticizes universities that cancel speeches from controversial speakers after a student outcry. He said you're free to protest a speech, but you should let opinions that differ from your own be expressed, because that's how you learn. Higher education is supposed to expose you to ideas you disagree with.

"When you think of the most profound intercultural experience, it was not a mediated experience," he said. "There was not a monitor standing by." Though there are often noble reasons students try to restrict certain kinds of speech, they often end up placing a metal rod in the spokes of genuine expression and interaction.

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