

The Role of University; Censorship, Discourse, and Building an Academic Community
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The question of whether people with radical opinions should be sponsored to speak at academic institutions is an increasingly frequent topic of discussion. People have been able to create identities centered around their beliefs and opinions for as long as the need to preach has existed. The proliferation of social media today has empowered people to create identities free from the control of traditional mainstream media outlets. Anyone savvy enough to use these platforms can create a platformed identity without the investment of mainstream corporations with global reach like FOX or CNN. With the insurgence of independent media and open access to the market of media communication, people with more unique identities and radical opinions become noticed in a haystack of people projecting their beliefs. There is a different level of accountability, however, that a pundit of the independent media can be held to compared with more renowned outlets. Someone like Chris Wallace may be held to a higher level of scrutiny for his or her mistakes or ignorance than someone like Ben Shapiro or Noam Chomsky. The relationship between identity and beliefs on social media coupled with the fact that these people are mostly funded independently contributes to increasing radicalness in the perspectives of the most notable of social media's political commentators. In an increasingly radical world, people in local communities will be more exposed to these radical opinions. I would like to use my own experiences as a Lehigh student to discuss the extent to which I believe it is acceptable to sponsor the platforming of a 'radical thinker.'

As a sophomore in the fall of 2020, I helped to create a club called the Douglass Dialogues. A few friends and I had come to the conclusion that while there were clubs at Lehigh centered on politics, such as the College Republicans or the Young Democrats, none of these organizations focused on the open, honest, and difficult dialogue between students of varied beliefs. We sought to foster an environment where students would be able to gain knowledge of each other's perspectives by understanding the nuances of unique voices with varied beliefs. We moderate biweekly discussions to discuss topics submitted and chosen democratically by club members. We also will occasionally sponsor speaker events to discuss topics anywhere from 'the myths of poverty' to the implications of scientific growth in the world around us. The main goals of this club are being able to develop one's own opinions about different topics while also being able to put other perspectives into context and look for considerations that may have not been made in the past.

In accordance with the willingness of Fredrick Douglass to "unite with anyone to do right and nobody to do wrong," our mission has been to address 'elephants in the room' and to discuss with each other where these differences come from, how they affect our lives, and whether the differences are reconcilable (Holland, 2023). Promoting positive political discourse is central to our ideology as an organization, and that can only be accomplished by maintaining a level of respect for conflicting perspectives. The aforementioned Douglass quote in its entirety encapsulates the goals of this organization in an even more precise manner, while also highlighting the important distinction between positive discourse and combative argumentation or agitative propaganda. To the Ladies of the Rochester Anti-Slavery Sewing Society, Douglass exclaimed:

"The Constitution is, according to its reading, an anti-slavery document; and, secondly, to

dissolve the Union, as a means to abolish slavery, is about as wise as it would be to burn up this city, in order to get the thieves out of it. But again, we hear the motto, 'no union with slave-holders;' and I answer it, as the noble champion of liberty, N. P. Rogers, answered it with a more sensible motto, namely--'No union with slave-holding.' I would unite with anybody to do right; and with nobody to do wrong” (Holland, 2023, p.33).

Without the ability to tolerate outrageously radical beliefs, people are dissuaded from engaging legitimate academic discussion. Some of the most influential figures in modern history have also been some of the most controversial. The difference between those who strive to create change for the better and those who look to spread their own private agenda is often the inability to look beyond certain assumptions, and to intentionally deliver messages with logical flaws. There is a fine line between altruistic messaging and propaganda. Social media is an amazing tool to foster discourse across a variety of opinions but can be used as a tool for good or bad depending on the intentions of the messenger. However, protecting the right to have those opinions debated is essential to constructive argumentation. While this can be done mistakenly, convincing people that a message is reasonable can also be attached to personal gain anywhere from making a sale to inciting emotional conflict or political opinions. This is how the unprecedented reach of social media to anyone with a network and a personality creates propaganda in ways the world has never experienced - at an unimaginable scale and speed. There is a fine line between someone with an opinion or challenge to an institution and someone with a message for personal gain.

The most contentious and politicized topics of debate in society are the ones that require making assumptions. So far back as the development of Aristotelian logic, the discussion of reason through discursive and non-discursive knowledge has been debated. Aristotle describes the need for basic assumptions understood through reliance on instinct to insight into the dissemination of discursive knowledge (University of Tennessee at Martin, 2023). A more contemporary theory by Adam Grant implores one about the need to not only think, but to rethink. *Think Again* explores the imperative of challenging peoples' approaches to different situations. Grant discusses thinking like a scientist, arguing that maintaining a fluid and open mind leads to the kinds of innovation that can reshape institutions or save lives (Grant, 2021). The first issue with legitimizing controversial actors is the question of whether to take their ideas and opinions to heart or to scrutinize their claims.

The founding vision for the Douglass Dialogues was to rethink how students can feel free to express their thoughts in a way that encourages positive discourse without worrying that their opinions will be shut down. While people have different views from one another, we seek to promote an environment where *anyone's* ideas can be respectfully challenged. We thrive on discourse surrounding difficult topics and the promotion of tolerance to better collectively develop each other's beliefs. There is no personal agenda to fulfill, and we actively work to compile arguments free of bias and considerate of the voices oftentimes less heard. It is a core belief of mine that challenging one's own opinions and values on a regular basis is essential to personal growth and development. Doing so with a group of people who are equally passionate about learning is why we host speaker events occasionally at The Douglass Dialogues. From professionals in the field of reproductive care about the ethics of abortion to hosting Noam Chomsky discussing the evolving state of extremism in the United States; we want to create dialogue and inform each other citing studies, opinions, and any influential sources worth discussing. While some of the speakers we host maintain more radical stances such as Dr.

Chomsky, others have much more general topics of discussion. One of my favorite panels consisted of Lehigh professors from different disciplines who came together to discuss the role of a university. The discussion was called “What is the University for?” and the topic of infusing university assets and practices with different opinions and values was debated between and among professors from different disciplines in the academy. An economics professor argued that it is dangerous to tie these together, but in cases like promoting an equitable community, university officials choose to do so anyway. A global studies professor argued that since some have expressed dedication to establishing a diverse and inclusive environment, there is a duty for staff to become equipped to assisting with such endeavors while also maintaining accountability for breaches of these values in solidarity with these historically marginalized voices. The philosophy professor on the panel quipped that a university is like a bicycle. It can take people from one point to another but without all its parts, it will not function properly.

In 2022, Pennsylvania State University withdrew funding from and canceled a comedy event scheduled to be co-hosted by the founder of the right-wing Proud Boys Gavin McInnes. Campus police at that institution referred to a “threat of escalating violence” when explaining their reasons for canceling the event (Ives, 2022). This year another student and I participated in an independent study attempting to raise awareness for the genocide being endured by the Uyghur Muslim minority in the Xinjiang province of China. Our panel was a follow up to a webinar event called ‘Never Again, and Again’ hosted the year before, when COVID travel restrictions were still in place. Our panelists were set to return including the president of the Uyghur American Association, Elfidar Iltebir, accompanied by several labor camp survivors, author and labor rights activist Jewher Ilham, and NBA star turned political activist, Enes Freedom. During the last few weeks of our fundraising efforts, we were told about a grant which would not only help us reach our goal, but also to lay the foundation for the return of this panel in the future. Several weeks before the event and despite previous confirmation that resources could be made available, we were informed that campus police declared our event a security risk due to Mr. Freedom’s “potential security threats.” The Lehigh University Police Department representatives cited his status as an enemy of the Turkish state and outspoken criticisms of the authoritarian Erdoğan for his censure, regardless of his status as a United States citizen. We were subsequently informed that this was event was determined to be “too much of a liability” and the bulk of our funding was withdrawn despite contractual agreements for funds having been signed. While I could complain that we could have succeeded with more funding or help organizing logistics, we were ultimately shut down due to a refusal to rethink the situation and to take things as they are. In my opinion, a simple conversation could have resolved the issue, but both parties were unwilling to engage in a dialogue out of concern for the other being too radical.

As non-profit organizations, universities are required to invest in themselves, to grow, and to uphold the values in which they charter themselves upon. Organizations need to maximize the amount of money generated while maintaining student and community approval and minimizing sunk costs and controversies that threaten their image and reputation. When one of these institutions commits to abiding by a specific set of values, they subject themselves to being scrutinized for every administrative decision made. When planned events begin to attract protest movements, these administrators become immediately pressured to protect the institution and to mitigate such controversies. A lot of the time these universities (Lehigh included) will say one thing while meaning another. They claim to dedicate themselves to creating environments where students can grow and develop their opinions together. They become subject to controversy when students seek to develop their opinions by turning to more radical perspectives from any

side of an issue. As previously mentioned, without having an understanding about the differences between radical thinkers and individuals on a mission to promote an agenda, universities default to utilizing their funds to host less-controversial speakers from more widely recognized spaces in media or politics. Often, a university's dedication to upholding such values prohibits people with certain beliefs from being able to share those opinions. While I believe that it is the role of university to explicitly avoid maintaining such positions, I also believe that without proof that someone's presence will lead to conflict, or that person is known to insight conflict, students should be free to explore whatever opinions that may be unpopular, but ultimately unharmed to others.

There is also an important distinction to be made between events hosted by departments at the university and by independent groups or student organizations. In my case, my independent study consisted of two students working on our own to fundraise and organize this event, and to advocate for those without a voice. The only approvals needed were from the university to schedule the event/space and to have enough departments express interest in co-sponsorship that the event can happen. To that, I believe that students curious in promoting a specific cause or seeking knowledge from professionals should be able to pursue. Fundraising justifies hosting the event because someone likely to insight harm or conflict is more likely to draw ire from potential donors which would become an automatic roadblock in being able to sponsor such an event. However, specific departments do not have those kinds of limitations. Beyond assembling a committee and selecting a speaker, these departments have the resources to host larger types of events. The makeup of the departments (and committees) will be indicative of the types of events they host and the messages they choose to project to their audience. One recent example of this was the speaker event featuring Pulitzer Prize winning author of the 1619 Project, Nikole Hannah Jones. "Presented by Lehigh University Creative Writing Program, Zoellner Arts Center and with support from an Anonymous Donor..." this event provided a powerful opportunity to rethink the ways in which we consider American history and to peer through the lens of a person who is both radical and seeking to insight change (Lehigh University, 2023). While this event was informative, and emotional, I am also aware that Ms. Jones' opinions are as shut down by certain pundits of the media as fast as any statement put out by activists maintaining more conservative views. She has been widely accused of attempting to rewrite a revisionist history in the same ways she argues that the mainstream teachings are revisionist. I believe that if an event equally radical was organized by any degree of a conservative group, that it would spark an outrage across Lehigh's campus. It is not so much about the ability for people with radical views to promote their opinions, but rather that the institutions themselves begin to pick and choose in order to best position themselves to profit. If the creative writing department needed to outsource its fundraising efforts, I can almost guarantee that at least one person would raise concerns that her narratives are essentially propaganda. Propaganda can be a good thing, and agitative propaganda is a tool used by many to rally people against certain groups rather than to work for the betterment of the whole. When a university that claims that it promotes educational liberty while also promoting community values for people to both learn and be protected, leaders must also bear the responsibility of scrutinizing just about any speaker it hosts. The only way to grow one's perspective is to criticize everything and not to take any argument as gospel without ensuring that it is both *reasonable* and *defensible*.

It should be a surprise to no one that some university officials would act in these kinds of hypocritical ways. Universities are entities in which the student body only has a few years to

make any real impact while the university is constantly pursuing ways to grow, reshape, and extract profit. That is how universities can create macro-level 10 year plans for which the students will never experience all the potential benefits. When it comes to taking a stance, I would have once said that a university had a role to play in protecting people from dangerous forms of messaging. But through my own experience in practice, some leaders just ignore those who create perceived inconveniences for the university. If departments and administrators work hard enough to promote the values of the institution, eventually they may experience collective change to some extent. For this reason, I believe that clubs such as The Douglass Dialogues, independent studies, and student activist groups are the most capable of hosting constructive events for the entirety of the community. These groups with specific topical interests will work to afford the most interesting speakers in their fields while also conducting grassroots fundraising and reaching out to more areas of the wider community. Departments and the university itself will continue to promote institutional values to the student body and by avoiding any speakers who might disagree with those values, it is therefore the responsibility of the ever-changing student body to challenge the administration over time and to attempt to address 'elephants in the room.' We cannot create a community where people can learn free of projected biases without being able to foster positive discourse, challenging the assumptions we make in our day to day lives, and by opening our minds to the opinions of others.

University is the last leg of the academic journey for most students. During that time, it is imperative that students can polish their critical thinking skills and can truly discover their passions in lieu of seeking employment and continuing to learn throughout life. Without the ability for students to express themselves freely in that kind of environment, ideals become shaped by the loudest voices, and people become left to their own devices. A university should at least make the student body aware when it is hosting speakers with agendas while also promoting an array of perspectives. Tying itself to a core set of values, no matter what they are, restricts the university from playing the role of an impartial institution for academic growth. It is interesting to hear the perspectives different people have on these issues, especially considering that their career choice and academic focuses are frequently reflective of their values regarding the role of university. Academic institutions should prioritize diversity of thought while also allowing more radical sentiments to be delivered and explored. However, they also must practice due diligence when funding speakers who may be crafting their messaging through propagandist means, seeking to insight conflict or violence rather than productive discourse and growth. They must choose between taking stances based on their chartered values and censoring their guests from being platformed. I believe that my experiences have shaped the way that I interpret this issue taking form at Lehigh, and I hope that as time evolves, the student body remains resilient in seeking the promotion of an environment where no opinion or belief is automatically shut down, and where people can discuss and collaborate without feeling ostracized or attacked.

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