

## Across the Aisle: Why Lehigh University Should Invite Speakers With Extreme Views to Speak

Over my four years of high school, I grew enamored with politics, stemming from my desire to give back to society. In spite of my affection for the subject, however, I felt pressured into silence in my community. This was due to the extreme political environment my school trapped me within. Despite being an institution which prides itself on producing socially and politically engaged individuals, in practice said values were only promoted when they were aligned with the beliefs of the institution itself. Nearly the entire student body identified as liberal, with many considering themselves to be democratic socialists. And so, despite considering myself liberal as well, I felt quite out of place with my comparatively moderate views. Anything deemed ‘not liberal enough’ was ridiculed and said person was shunned. As a result, I was locked out of participating in one of my greatest passions. Attending college has granted me a completely different experience. I have felt free to express myself and participate in discussions surrounding issues I care deeply about. In addition, Lehigh University is a much larger institution, and thus, far more ideologically diverse, and the exposure to these disparate beliefs is something I have come to appreciate. Not everyone shares that sentiment, however. I know several people that identify as either liberal or conservative and demonize those on the opposing side. This outlook is not only unhealthy but counterproductive; each individual thinks that his or her perspective is superior, yet all share the same ultimate goal: to better society. Despite this, those further to the right or left of the political spectrum are often labeled fringe and dismissed as inconsequential. It is no wonder then that an increasing number of individuals, especially young Americans, feel disillusioned with politics and their elected officials. According to a poll from the Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School, 42 percent of Americans aged 18-29 believe their vote “doesn’t make a difference” and 56 percent say “politics today are no longer able to meet the challenges our country is facing” (Harvard University, 2022). This likely stems from the broken and combative state of our government and that over 330 million Americans are represented by just two major political parties. In order to remedy this, those of all political beliefs and backgrounds must be acknowledged, represented, and treated as essential members of society. Recently, the question was posed to the student body on whether or not people with extreme views should be invited to speak on Lehigh University campus, paid for

with university funds. I strongly feel that these people should be welcomed to campus and given the opportunity to present their beliefs and values so as to allow members of the student body to feel represented and for Lehigh University to be able to represent its stated values.

The first reason that Lehigh should bring in these speakers is because it would reflect the diversity on campus. Lehigh University is a vibrant and diverse community, with a student body of 7,394 students representing the entire country and 93 countries around the world (Lehigh University, “University Statistics,” 2023). This guarantees broad representation across the political spectrum. Additionally, Lehigh University is located in Bethlehem, PA, within a politically divided district in a frequent swing state. Pennsylvania’s 7th district just reelected Democrat Susan Wild in 2022 by a margin of just 51.0 percent to 49.0 percent, after she won by a similar margin in 2020. Meanwhile, Pennsylvania voted for Republican Donald Trump in 2016 and Democrat Joe Biden in 2020. This I find relevant because it could prove to be one of the few experiences in many student’s lives where there is exposure to numerous backgrounds and beliefs. Americans are increasingly sorting themselves into political bubbles, with rural America moving more conservative and favoring Republicans and urban areas becoming a conservative desert. A place such as Lehigh University can be a community that bursts these bubbles. A way to aid in that is to bring in speakers representing all swaths of life. They can promote their values and empower like-minded individuals on campus to become more politically involved.

Another reason Lehigh should invite these individuals to campus is that it would reflect Lehigh’s mission and commitment to diverse thought. The adoption of Lehigh’s Core Values, originally adopted in 2007, can be justified. Two of said values, “academic freedom” and “intellectual curiosity,” can clearly be represented through hosting events including those with extreme views (Lehigh University, “Mission, Vision and Values,” 2022). And should Lehigh choose to reject these speakers, Lehigh would clearly be violating one of its own core values by actively promoting a lack of diverse thought. Further, we, as students, have a responsibility to be intellectually curious. We should not be attending college to reaffirm our pre-existing beliefs; we are here to pursue new ideas and perspectives that can help shape us into more knowledgeable individuals. Additionally, Lehigh’s Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity exists to promote a community which is inclusive of those of all faiths, backgrounds, and beliefs. “Lehigh is committed to being an institution that strives to enhance diversity, inclusion and equity. Our ongoing goal is to ensure that all members of our community feel safe, valued and welcome”

(Lehigh University, “Diversity, Inclusion and Equity at Lehigh,” 2022). Likewise, Lehigh’s Principles of Our Equitable Community, in which they state they “confront and reject discrimination in all its forms,” specifically includes political beliefs among those listed. These are excellent goals to pursue, however until every student feels empowered to voice their opinions and perspectives, greater effort must be put in to make them a reality (Lehigh University, “The Principles of Our Equitable Community,” 2022).

Arguments against inviting such speakers, however, remain. One argument against inviting certain speakers is that few people would welcome them to campus. While there is certainly a strong possibility of this, the fear of backlash should not dissuade the school from accomplishing its goals. Additionally, ignoring the speakers accomplishes little; a student choosing to be ignorant of the reality of the speakers’ presence accomplishes nothing besides further promoting the alienation of those across the political spectrum. Individuals must be confronted with the fact that there are those with different perspectives and beliefs than themselves if they are to grow. Furthermore, social media has demonstrated that modern political discourse is incredibly toxic and can spark anger and potentially escalate. I do not believe this would be a significant issue, however, for one key reason. Social media interactions are impersonal and often anonymous. Being brought face-to-face should bring a sense of civility and engagement that is essential for the proper sharing of ideas. One final argument against bringing in these speakers is that university funds should not be allocated for such purposes. This is a reasonable view to hold, and a very American one. A common complaint spouted by Americans is that they do not want their tax money going to support certain causes due to moral or financial objections. Most of the student body already pays a significant amount to have the privilege of attending this institution; Lehigh charging even more to bring in speakers, including those which would not be welcomed, would likely lead to significant pushback. However, I believe that these individuals have the wrong outlook. I believe Lehigh, as an educational institution, has a duty and obligation to promote free thought and diversity of political beliefs. Inviting speakers with diverse ideologies would be just one way to do so.

The presence of politically divisive individuals on campus is not to send a message to the student body about whose political beliefs are right and wrong or to indoctrinate students into a certain ideology. We, as Lehigh students, do not need to agree; we just need to listen and accept. It is something that I do often when I see my great-aunt. Like myself, she is a very politically

involved individual. However, we diverge significantly in our beliefs. As mentioned above, I consider myself to be liberal; she, however, worked under Ronald Reagan during his administration. It would be difficult to find two people with more conflicting outlooks on society. This has never bothered me, however. In fact, I look forward to our discussions, which often center on economic issues but frequently can include any relevant current events issue. And, as expected, we almost never come to an agreement, but the conversation never escalates. It remains civil and understanding. This, I believe, is for two reasons; first is that we are family. We knew each other for 15 years before I showed any interest in politics and began voicing them. This connection gave us a building block to be courteous to one another. The second reason is that we both share one critical viewpoint on politics, and it is that it is broken. We both understand how nothing gets accomplished in Congress anymore and that politicians would rather dig in their heels and appeal to their base of voters than actually accomplish critical legislation. The result of this is that every day Americans are suffering. We both realize that one cannot please every American, so the goal should instead be to make as many happy as possible. Debate and compromise need to provide the bedrock of governing again if we are to move forward as a society. We must move past the era of destructive rhetoric and remain open to the possibilities and opportunities in front of us. We all must take part in this mission, and Lehigh can begin by moderating constructive political discourse. Lehigh must invite speakers of all views to speak on campus.

#### Works Cited

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