

Let The People Speak
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When I was in the second grade, my parents booked our February break vacation to Beijing, China. The week consisted of the most delicious Peking duck meals and hikes to famous monuments like the Great Wall of China. As curious tourists, my parents booked a tour guide to show us around the city. Her name was Lucy and as a child I loved Lucy. She especially doted on my younger sister and I by giving us candies during long car rides. Lucy was a bright light and always told the most captivating stories. However, the memory that still resonates with me was when Lucy's light was dimmed. Once when we were in the car, my father asked Lucy a question about the government and her skin immediately paled. She made it very clear that she could not speak about this information and the subject was dropped. As a second-grade student, I did not really understand what was transpiring, but I had enough social cues to not ask why. It was not until I spoke with my parents after the vacation that I learned not every country granted its citizens freedom of speech like the United States.

As a political science student, I think of this childhood memory quite often when I discuss freedom of speech and political tolerance with my peers. Freedom of speech is often debated with regard to specific books in a course curriculum or even college funded speakers who are brought onto campus. Throughout my two years at Lehigh University, combined with my understanding of history, Lehigh should not only host speakers with extreme political ideals, but University leaders should encourage students to attend these speaker nights to facilitate a politically diverse campus, increase political involvement, and uphold Lehigh's core tradition of promoting intellectual curiosity.

When discussing the hosting of certain speakers, it is important to bring the First Amendment into conversation. Contrary to popular belief, this amendment is not absolute and there are actually many exceptions to "freedom of speech" (United States Courts, 2023). Now representatives of the American Library Association indicate, "The categories of unprotected speech include obscenity, child pornography, defamatory speech, false advertising, true threats, and fighting words. Deciding what is and is not protected speech is reserved to courts of law" (American Library Association, 2021). The most common argument students give against the inclusion of speakers that have extreme ideals is that these speakers produce hate speech which is an obvious violation to the First Amendment. Now the American Bar Association defines hate speech as, "speech that offends, threatens, or insults groups, based on race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or other traits" (American Bar Association, 2023). Lehigh University does not endorse hate speech as its administration has reinforced this message through repeated emails and the implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusivity (DEI) initiatives. Even though there are established exceptions, judges contend with the majority of First Amendment disputes. This situation is due to the reality that there is a significant difference between hate speech and being made uncomfortable by individuals with differential views. For example, in *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the Supreme Court justices established that freedom of speech could only be suspended if it substantially disrupts the educational process. The key word utilized by the justices is substantial; speakers are allowed under the First Amendment to speak as, in general, their speeches are fueling the educational process. Preventing extreme ideological speakers from coming to campus is not only a threat to the education process, but it is a threat to democracy and freedom of speech as we know it. Some groups of students may protest a given speaker and they have every right to do so, but their

dissent cannot prevent a speaker from coming as this is direct censorship. Within the recent decade, our culture has very much shifted to political intolerance and people generally do not like hearing ideologies that go against their way of thinking, but diverse thought processes are conducive to freedom and productivity in a democracy. Certain groups of students may try to prevent an extreme speaker from coming to campus, but they do not have legal grounds and this practice would only result in dictatorial censorship.

Some students who oppose extreme speakers from being hosted on campus argue from an economic standpoint, claiming that they do not want their tuition paying for people they differential ideologies. This argument is flawed because college is meant to offer students opportunities to learn about different thought processes and money should be spent on speakers who have diverse opinions. To start, the tuition and fees to attend Lehigh is \$78,000 and this money is allocated for infrastructure, cost of professors, dorm arrangements, and other educational opportunities. Now Lehigh brands one of its core tenants as, “Learning experiences grounded in fundamental, transferable skills across all disciplines and in real world challenges” (Lehigh University, 2023). The best way to have students gain experience and knowledge is by hearing how others think about certain situations, a skill that is very necessary in the real world. University leaders are not telling students to change how they feel, but rather understand how others think. Two prominent extreme speakers are Ben Shapiro and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez: the former being very far right and the latter being far left. The bottom line is that if these figures chose to speak at Lehigh, I may not agree with everything they say; however, I would go because I would want to learn more about how they developed their beliefs. These speakers would require compensation and this is where the money we pay for college should go to foster an environment of maximum intellectual conversations and exposure to different perspectives. During my time at Lehigh, I have found that the most memorable classes I have taken are classes where I disagreed with my peers because it facilitated passionate discussion, a forum that would occur if the school paid for extreme ideological speakers to come to campus.

In alignment with Lehigh’s testament to real world experiences, the university also lists intellectual curiosity as one of its main values. Having students hear from speakers who have different ideological stances on modern day issues is very conducive towards fueling that curiosity and exposing students to different perspectives. University leaders take pride in creating an environment where students investigate their passions and work to answer challenging questions, hence the large percentage of students participating in research (Lehigh University, 2023). I am not suggesting that students are compelled to agree with everything a speaker may promulgate, but just because someone does not have the same opinion as another does not mean that the potential speaker cannot come onto campus as this is blatant censorship. From the perspective of a political science major and history minor, I read countless documents on a daily basis where I do not agree with the thesis, but it is important to hear extreme and moderate viewpoints in order to be a well-rounded student and citizen. For example, I have had to read the Communist Manifesto many times for some of my classes. Now I do not really agree with any of the content in this document, but reading it allows me to understand how pioneers of political theory have thought. I fear that if we restrict these types of speakers, then we will hinder intellectual curiosity and possibly decrease political activism for Lehigh students. Historically, college students typically engage in a lot of activism, as evidenced through the protests during the Vietnam War and the creation of the Students for a Democratic Society during the 1960s. Having speakers who push the boundaries of how we think is productive for a campus for students who are navigating their opinions and thoughts on politics. Squandering intellectual

curiosity because some fear there will be some backlash is not only a ridiculous conclusion, but is a threat to democracy and freedom of thought.

Clearly hosting speakers who have extreme views is highly beneficial to a university with students navigating their way through politics as these events would be successful economic decisions as well as enhancing the social and political climate on campus. Hopefully in the future, more speakers who push the boundaries will be hosted on the campus for the benefit of the students who will be the leaders of tomorrow.

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