

OPINION

How universities can restore free speech and constructive conversations

Concerns over the unmooring of free speech, academic freedom, and ideological diversity on campus can only be addressed through campuswide transformation.

By **Suzanne Nossel** Updated February 12, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



NYPD officers clashed with protesters demonstrating around Columbia University, Feb. 2 in New York City. Multiple arrests were made. ALEXI J. ROSENFELD/GETTY

During the 2008 automotive industry crisis, [General Motors placed a full-page ad in](#)

Automotive News, hoping to reassure lawmakers debating a bailout and a disillusioned public doubtful that American cars could still compete. In the ad, GM copped to certain failings on quality, design, and expenditures and pledged to make improvements. The letter followed a standard crisis management script: a mea culpa followed by a commitment to self-repair.

American universities, reeling from months of controversy over free speech, are following a similar playbook: issuing statements, convening task forces, and writing to alumni and donors to try to quell uproar. The [University of Michigan published new principles on Diversity of Thought and Free Expression](#). Harvard University and others are debating adoption of versions of the [University of Chicago's commitment to "institutional neutrality,"](#) a policy that forswears institutional comment on political and social issues. Columbia University has [unveiled new programming](#) on dialogue across difference.

University leaders hope these measures will restore calm. But there is no quick fix or silver bullet solution to what ails our campuses. The issues making headlines and agitating quads — with students and faculty afraid to voice opinions and political debates waged through shouts and intimidation rather than reasoned inquiry — can't be solved with a few high-profile gestures.

A deeper crisis of confidence in higher education requires attention. A [2023 Gallup poll](#) found that just 36 percent of Americans professed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in universities, with trust plummeting over the past eight years. Across the country, legislation is being introduced to erode universities' autonomy — [prohibiting instruction](#) on certain topics, [unraveling tenure protections](#), and weakening faculty governance. Similar repressive measures could be in store at the federal level, with federal funding for research and financial aid held hostage.

University leaders need to think big. Concerns over the unmooring of free speech, academic freedom, and ideological diversity on campus can only be addressed through campuswide transformation. Such change is possible: Universities have successfully adapted to coeducation and the drive toward environmental sustainability, to cite but two examples, with sweeping changes. Now universities need to make a similarly sustained and concerted effort to restore cultures where open exchange can thrive.

When students arrive on campus, orientation programs and first-year classes should introduce

them to the core ideas of free speech, the First Amendment, viewpoint diversity, academic freedom, and open exchange of ideas. In the classroom and in extracurricular activities, students should be taught the skills necessary for holding challenging conversations, voicing controversial viewpoints, managing their reactions to uncomfortable speech, and finding constructive ways to respond.

Such courses and seminars should not be voluntary or they will attract only those already inclined toward these values. To overhaul the campus climate, universities must also reach those who know or care little about free speech or who view it as a smoke screen for promoting hateful ideas. Instead, just as colleges now require classes or sessions on sexual assault or expository writing, among other topics, they should insist that everyone participate in programs or courses on free speech and difficult dialogues. Doing so early in a student's career would help ensure that for the rest of their college years students will be able to engage in robust give-and-take inside and outside the classroom.

Beyond these introductory primers, professors should reinforce each semester the centrality of free-ranging classroom discussion and teach students how to partake in it. Staff in student affairs, residential life, and campus security need regular education on university policies covering political expression, protest rights, hateful speech, and conflict resolution. Those precepts must be reinforced through communications and messaging that ensure that everyone on campus fully understands both their rights and the limits to exercising those rights.

Such efforts must not be pitted against the universities' commitment to diversity. There is much universities can do to make members of racial, religious, or other groups feel welcomed on campus without trading away uncompromising respect for free expression. If key constituencies feel they belong and have the ear of leaders, they will be less likely to overreact to speech that might otherwise be construed to feed into an overall climate of indifference or hostility.

Diminished ideological diversity on campus needs to be tackled head-on, through admissions and faculty and staff recruitment and support efforts. When powerful constituencies call to ban or discipline errant speech or otherwise bend policies, university leaders must stand firm, ready to take the heat.

In previous generations, blue ribbon commissions at institutions like Yale and the University of Chicago took 6 to 8 months to develop meaty recommendations that helped steady the

universities then; the recommendations serve as sources of wisdom to this day. Today's leaders need to get this right and must not let social media uproar or impatient donors deter them from taking the time for careful analysis and deliberation and the securement of buy-in for crucial changes.

Ten years after its ad ran in Automotive Magazine, General Motors had turned around. Company leaders recognized that crisis management was only a first step. What followed was a broad transformation, leading to GM being heralded as "the best in the business" for its [culture of cooperation](#) and billions in profits. This moment is a wake-up call for universities to remake themselves into institutions worthy of the world-leading status they claim, equipping graduates to people a diverse, pluralistic democracy that has free speech as its lifeblood.

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