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Can we talk?

By Kate Carlisle

ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES—
INCLUDING MAYFLOWER HILL—
FREE SPEECH COLLIDES WITH
POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

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We need to be very clear about our values when it comes to issues around freedom of speech and around respect and civility. These things can coexist. We can't be a place that shuts down different voices; we're an intellectual community first and we need to be able to challenge people in rigorous ways.”

—President David A. Greene

“Watch your language.” ... “Words can hurt.” ...

In a world where thoughts can pour directly out of our heads and onto another person's computer screen, and insults can circle the globe in the time it takes to tap send, these kindergarten admonishments are taking on added resonance on American college campuses.

A flood of incidents at institutions ranging from huge land-grant universities to small liberal arts colleges is growing into a conflict between “politically correct” culture and freedom of speech. The swift reaction has been passionate. Some warn of suppression of speech, while others welcome the shift toward a more sensitive culture as a needed adjustment in an increasingly intolerant world. Still others complain that such increased “tolerance” is itself a form of intolerance.

A recent national survey revealed that while most college students believe their campus environment should expose them to diverse viewpoints, a large majority also believes that schools should be allowed to restrict intentionally offensive language. And 54 percent of students recently surveyed by the Knight Foundation and Gallup said the climate on campus prevents some people from saying what they believe, because others might find it offensive.

But can colleges monitor and restrict slurs and hate speech while also protecting free speech and the give and take of ideas in what is, after all, an academic and intellectual space? In Colby's tight-knit community, the conversation is just getting started. “We need to be very clear about our values when it comes to issues around freedom of speech and around respect and civility,” said President David A. Greene. “These things can coexist.”

The debate has spread across the country, as disagreements about speech issues have led to public skirmishes. In 2015 a serious conflict over campus diversity sparked a freedom of speech brushfire at the University of Missouri, ultimately claiming the chancellor of the flagship institution and resulting in the dismissal of a communications professor. A month later, sparks spread to the venerable halls of Yale, where a college dean was assailed—on videotape—by students claiming he had no right to speak. (In a complicated meta-twist, the administrator, noted sociologist Nicholas Christakis, was speaking in defense of his wife, who had written a letter chiding Yale for decreeing certain Halloween costumes potentially offensive.) Fifty miles up the road in Middletown, Conn., the sparks turned into flame on the campus of Wesleyan University, where students proposed defunding the campus newspaper for publishing a column they deemed racist.

As the conflict spread, Williams College canceled two right-wing speakers who were invited to campus as part of the

college's “Uncomfortable Learning” series. At Smith College students holding a sit-in barred reporters from covering the event unless they participated and demonstrated “solidarity” with the group's goals. And at Ithaca College, protests broke out—and ultimately cost the president his job—after a prominent alumna made racially tinged remarks at a campus event. More recently, the distribution of sombreros at a tequila party resulted in complaints of ethnic stereotyping at Bowdoin College, and at Emory University in Atlanta, pro-Donald Trump chalkings across campus spurred complaints from students who said they felt oppressed by what they saw as deliberate attempts to divide the community and intimidate students of color.

“What's at stake is really interesting,” said Abby Snyder '18, co-president of the Feminist Alliance. “I think when we talk about a freedom of speech, that ‘freedom’ is conflated with the idea that you can say whatever you want, instead of that being freedom within the laws.” She pointed out that hate speech is easily differentiated from simply holding “differing views.” And Snyder—a double major in anthropology and women's, gender, and sexuality studies—believes campuses are actually the perfect laboratory for these kind of arguments.

“I think it is crucial that this debate is taking place on college campuses in particular, as they are frequently the center of knowledge-making,” she said.

At Colby, a protest aimed at drawing attention to racial injustice nationally in 2015 prompted a spate of hostile and racist comments on the anonymous forum Yik Yak. The comments led to a campus-wide event where students, faculty, and Greene denounced the comments and called for ongoing conversation on race at the College. A yearlong discussion of community, diversity, and inclusion followed, with freedom of speech a frequent analog in the debate. An online campus bulletin board distributed as part of the daily community announcements came alive this February with many postings about “PC culture.”

One focal point was a campus forum post by Rose Nelson '16, which began with her criticism that a student-organized campus "Suit Day" was insensitive to women and students whose socioeconomic background doesn't call for a business suit. Nelson subsequently posted a Yik Yak transcript of hostile and sometimes insulting dismissal of her criticism, which in turn set off several days of argument about whether using politically correct language amounts to suppression of speech.

Nelson asked, "What do people who speak against political correctness fear? That it opens them to personal attacks, misunderstanding, and unfair labels if they should voice their opinion? How have they treated me and my posts? No argument should be above criticism, and we ought to be held to our opinions when we voice them in a public space. So how about we try to start dropping the anonymity?"

As the comments flew, some said an intellectual community should have a place for expression of a variety of opinions.

"Education and the pursuit of intellect means being challenged," wrote Charlotte Jones '19. "If one is not uncomfortable, he or she is not being challenged. It means allowing voices of those who are far right, far left, independent, socialist, communist, fascist to be heard and debated and discussed. It does not mean that a single voice who determines itself to be most PC ought to be able to determine the legitimacy or competency of all the other voices."

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—Abby Snyder '18

And faculty weighed in.

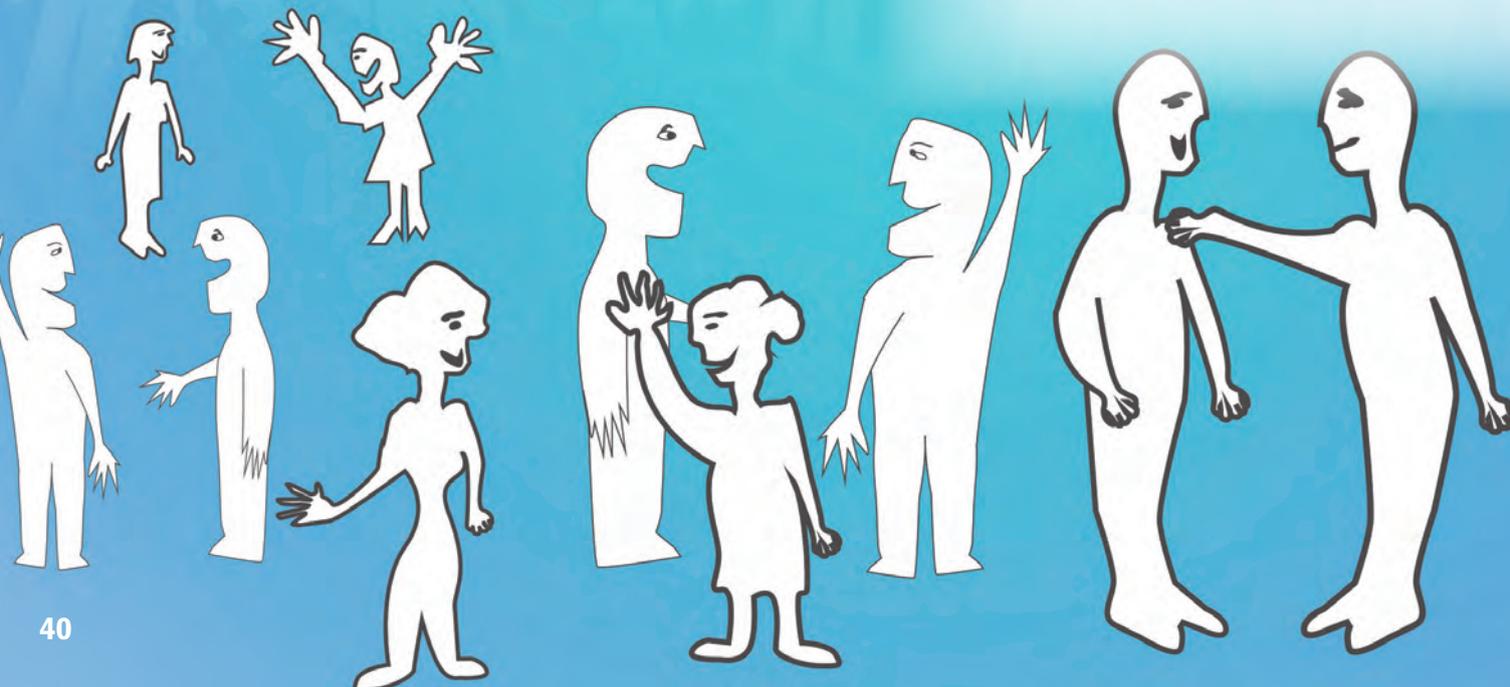
"Here at Colby, and in the world at large, it is important to reflect on whose interests are really being served when being equitable and respectful is positioned as something to be avoided, something dangerous, something threatening to the very nature of our mission as an institution of higher education," wrote Professor of Education Mark Tappan, who studies and teaches issues relating to social justice and often leads discussions of issues of racism and privilege.

Some say that Colby has a historic commitment to freedom of expression, starting with the persecution and death of one of its most famous alumni. In 1837 Elijah Lovejoy, newspaper publisher and abolitionist, was assassinated, his warehouse burned and presses destroyed, for his anti-slavery editorials in the Alton, Ill., *Observer*. Immediately hailed as a martyr for abolition, he is now widely considered one of journalism's first secular saints. No other college bestows an award dedicated to a free-speech hero like Lovejoy, but beyond that, Colby's very nature as an institution behooves it to take speech rights seriously, said Greene.

"We can't be a place that shuts down different voices," he said. "We're an intellectual community first and we need to be able to challenge people in rigorous ways. The best arguments have to win."

Some students at Colby say their arguments, rather than being appropriately challenged, are being suppressed in the name of political correctness.

"There's this really fine line between freedom of speech and making sure that what you're saying is acceptable with the times and isn't hurting anyone," said Chris Shorey '16. "Figuring out that what you're saying is said in a way that isn't hurtful and malicious."



“No argument should be above criticism, and we ought to be held to our opinions when we voice them in a public space. So how about we try to start dropping the anonymity?”

—Rose Nelson '16,
commenting on posts on
the social media site Yik Yak

Shorey, head of the Colby Republicans, said he sometimes feels uncomfortable expressing his political views on campus. “I’ve felt, occasionally, that my views aren’t welcome, whether in class or outside,” he said.

Philosophers and sociologists suggest that what can now safely be deemed a trend of conflict over freedom of speech—both as a powerful ethic and a political right enshrined in the Constitution—is coming to a head as part of a more encompassing political movement over diversity and disenfranchisement. Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Kate Manne of Cornell and Jason Stanley of Yale, both professors of philosophy, suggest that the argument turns more on how people in power use the right to speech.

Colby Assistant Professor of English Aaron Hanlon, who writes about politics and other topics for national magazines, agrees. “My read on it is that it’s a recapitulation of broader political wars beyond campus,” Hanlon said. “And it’s about what kinds of speech do we categorize as a threat, and what is protected speech.”

He sees an interesting power dynamic “inversion” playing out around language, when those whose speech is deemed offensive claim that their rights to speech are being abridged. “Whose voice is being judged as the norm, and who is the censor?” Hanlon asked.

Attempting to come to grips with the issue, colleges and universities adopted statements on free expression. At the University of Chicago last year, for example, the university said it should not try to shield people from ideas “they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive.” The statement also says the university has a responsibility to ensure visiting speakers on campus are unhindered by student protesters. “Concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as a justification for closing off discussion of ideas.” More than half a dozen institutions—including Purdue, Princeton, American University, Johns Hopkins, and others—quickly followed suit with similar declarations.

“What’s remarkable is that, at this moment, our law remains very libertarian on speech. But at this moment, culturally, it’s different.”

—Wiswell Associate Professor of
American Constitutional Law
Joseph Reisert

It is perhaps not a coincidence that, at a time of great political upheaval around the world and against the backdrop of a confounding political campaign in the United States, a debate on speech is roiling on campuses.

“What’s remarkable is that, at this moment, our law remains very libertarian on speech,” said Colby constitutional scholar and Professor of Government Joseph Reisert, citing the 2010 Citizens United case, when the U.S. Supreme Court declared that campaign contributions could be defined as political speech. “But at this moment, culturally, it’s different. It does seem driven by young people. And it’s not only about the overtly hostile and defaming speech; it’s about sanding the edges off whatever makes you uncomfortable.”

Reisert observed that on a campus like Colby’s the important demands of civility and community may require a more thoughtful approach to the way community members communicate. “We all have to get along,” he said.

Snyder, of the Feminist Alliance, said she’s acquired “so many more tools for daily interactions” at college and has learned that resolving the conflict solution comes down to respectful community living—acknowledging others’ backgrounds and history and recognizing the power structures in force. “By using more respectful language, political correctness acknowledges an understanding of why alternative words are harmful in various ways,” she said.

And for Greene, overseeing a campus brimming with ideas, debate, and the push and pull of political ideologies, it’s also about honoring Colby’s “special obligation” to create an environment that encourages transformative education. “That education at its best is deeply engaging, provocative, and challenging,” he said.

At Colby, the conversation—drawing from different perspectives, in search of common ground—will continue. ©