

Losing Ground in the Fight for Free Speech on Campus

This Year's Buckley Institute Report Paints a Dreary Picture

by [Matthew Stewart](#) (November 2023)



Free Speech, Grace Golden, 1940

The October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel and subsequent events have dominated the scene of campus activism in the U.S. Universities are a primary source of Palestinian support and have been amongst the most visible sites of pro-Palestinian rallies. Suddenly, some elements of the campus left abandoned

their erstwhile criticism of hate speech, and found themselves all-in practitioners of it, rallying to the cause of victim-blaming on behalf of a terrorist organization whose charter calls for the eradication of Israel.

The activists' double-standards have been [well-noted](#). It is also worth noting that these demonstrations are almost exclusively occurring on elite campuses, which have long been prime locations for social justice overreach and the exercise of cancel culture. This eruption of no-holds-barred free expression should not be taken as a sign that free-speech culture has reawakened on the American campus. More likely it is an anomaly applicable only to the aftermath of 10/7. For a more accurate reading campus of free speech, deeper trends must be analyzed.

The end of September marks two related items: the anniversary of the Free Speech Movement's birth on the campus of the University of California and the annual report from Yale University's [Buckley Institute](#). This report registers the health of free speech on university campuses with a particular emphasis on student attitudes. [This fall's report](#) is particularly dreary.

No matter the leadership's position on other political matters, the Free Speech Movement got one big thing right: universities ought to uphold free speech. Let's go further: universities should positively cultivate an appetite for free speech. So should high schools. This clearly isn't happening. Many of today's college students seem eager to disavow the rights and freedoms doggedly fought for sixty years ago.

Surveying American college and university students for the ninth consecutive year, the Buckley Institute flatly declares them to be "more censorious than ever." The executive summary points out several firsts, all trending in the wrong direction. For the first time an outright majority (51%, up 10% from last year) of respondents agreed that universities

should have speech codes. For the first time a plurality (46%) of students supports the use of shout downs to silence speakers with whom they disagree.

Likewise, 46% believe “that opinions they find offensive from fellow students should be reported to school administrators,” another first-time plurality. The report delivers more woeful and worrying data, but these findings alone speak volumes. Students who express a desire to have the bounds of acceptable speech codified by institutional authorities and have those authorities enforce righthink and punish wrongthink have clearly parted ways with the Free Speech Movement’s belief that college students are adults who wish to be free thinkers.

Educational scholar Jonathan Zimmerman [has noted](#) that previous generations of student activists “typically fought to remove administrative rules and restrictions on campus ... [while] today’s students often demand more of them.” Studying student-activists’ demands from as far back as 2015, Zimmerman affirms that “almost every ... protest ‘against’ college administrations [would] require more college administration.” In an enormous generational switcheroo, the ardent desire of Boomer college students to rid the university of every vestige of *in loco parentis* has turned into a call for its return in an even more intrusive form.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and free-speech advocate Greg Lukianoff [connect](#) this keep-me-safe and don’t-let-them-talk attitude to overly protective parental practices and a safety-first educational culture. Combined, these factors prevent children from developing coping skills, including the ability to respond to ideas they don’t agree with. Another observation needs to be added to this insight: ideas deemed disagreeable are likely to challenge previously unexamined progressive pieties, since the American educational industry, like the academy, is dominated by the left.

The eminent generational scholar Jean Twenge has sifted

through massive survey data to produce [a comprehensive effort](#) of Gen Z's salient features. She goes so far as to cite "restricting speech" as a generation-defining trait. So is "growing up slowly." Now put these traits together. Traditional media and social media alike are full of stories from employers and managers baffled by young employees' expectations that their sensitivities supersede all other considerations. Twenge's data-driven analysis strongly supports the voluminous anecdotal evidence. It seems that an admittedly immature cohort nonetheless feels itself competent to set the boundaries of "acceptable" speech.

All this might be merely annoying in some settings, but when cancellation works itself out in institutions vital to democracy and civil discourse there is a serious problem. Notorious examples leap to mind. Rather than practice journalism and recognize that the editorial pages of a major newspaper might air conflicting opinions, during the summer and fall of 2020 the *New York Times* staff constituted itself as a Committee on Public Safety, getting several people fired and hounding others out. When they should have been standing up against cancellation, those in authority hid, apologized, confessed, and quit.

It would be a mistake to dismiss this example as an artifact of 2020 morality fever, now cooled. Sensitivity readers remain entrenched at publishing houses, pronouncing on which authors are allowed to say what about whom and which words they are permitted to use in doing so. Staff members even attempt to quash the publication of books whose authors they disdain and have succeeded in doing so. In such cases those in superior positions have obviously ceded their authority.

Such caving by higher-ups obviously sends the wrong message, surrendering institutional prerogatives and duties to those who cry safety as a tactical bid for power. It seems ironic that the Buckley report comes from Yale, which every year produces at least one high-profile case of cancellation,

ensorship or suppression, invariably tied to some version of group-identity politics.

In fact, Yale fittingly symbolizes the present trends that need to be reversed, starting at the top. In 1974 President Kingman Brewster Jr. convened a Committee on Freedom of Expression at Yale, appointing the eminent historian C. Vann Woodward as chair. The Woodward Report became a gold standard in the stalwart expression of free speech standards on campus, supplanted only by the Chicago Statement produced by the University of Chicago Committee on Freedom of Expression in 2014.

The Woodward report asserts that “every official of the university ... has a special obligation to foster free expression.” Not tolerate, mind you, *foster*. Contrarily Yale under President Peter Salovey has come to epitomize the worst of university cancel culture, and his instincts toward throw-money-at-them appeasement and penchant for rhetorical indulgence have apparently overmastered any qualms he might have about forsaking his school’s traditional charge.

Read alongside The Foundation for Rights and Expression’s (FIRE) recent [College Free Speech Rankings](#), the Buckley report shows that much work remains to be done merely to hold ground on freedom of expression.

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