

# Free speech on campus



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Freedom of speech is the freedom to speak freely without censorship. Early Americans enjoyed great freedom of speech compared to citizens of other nations. This strength was achieved through the exercise of the First Amendment right to freedom of expression. The right of free speech is held by all of us. Any attempt to limit that freedom for some, including the bigot who expresses prejudiced, wrong, and hateful opinions, risks limiting that freedom for all of us. The U. S. Constitution says that we are a nation with the freedom to articulate beliefs and opinions in open discussion, but current, unwritten "politically correct" rules many times conflict with our constitutional rights so that we must ask, does freedom of speech really exist in our daily life? Is the First Amendment being applied to students' life on campus? Before expressing a strong opinion on anything, most of us carry out a practical inventory of possible results: how will a professor, the dean or some other campus authority figure react if a student disagrees with the professor's way of teaching or some other action that affects campus life? Should campuses encourage the free exchange of ideas? Free speech on campus should be encouraged to promote academic achievement but controlled to discourage speech that deters students from enjoying the intellectual life in an academic setting. Where else but on campus can difficult issues be debated? Free speech on campus is so important because academic settings thrive on a constant discourse of opposing ideas. Freedom of speech on campus defines students' spirit to imagination, creativity, enterprise, and wonder. This is the place where disputes and debates can take place between students working on different group projects in class, participating in discussions about reasons of downturns of economy in the United States, expressing their ideas about the war in Iraq. Students also

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should have opportunity to express their ideas freely during college events. For example, such Foothill College monthly series celebrating cultural diversity: “ Latino Heritage”, “ Gay/Lesbian Heritage”, “ Black History Month”, help students understand problems of different cultures and minority groups. These events break stereotypes, build bridges, and help start looking beyond the letter, preventing aggressiveness towards each other in future. In the United States we have many cultures, each with its own history, language, and symbols, some of which might be harmful to others. People are so dependent on own cultures’ symbols that they often take them for norm. For example, some students create a group on campus wearing t-shirts with a Nazi swastika, saying that it is merely “ stylish” and those who oppose it are “ nuts”, while other students see it as a threat of racial oppression. The teacher can use this situation as a teachable moment about the use of symbols in public. Students might think that freedom of speech means that they can say on campus whatever they feel like, but while freedom of speech gives us the right to verbally express how we feel, it does not give us the right to curse, threaten, and abuse other people. Should there be any limitations on speech on campus? Many students are not able to concentrate in class and do not participate in college activities because they are getting offended by the students who use offensive language. There is a perpetual tension between free speech absolutists on campus and those who favor restrictions on certain types of speech or expression, including pornography, obscene art, sexually explicit library materials. A line must be drawn between acceptable and unacceptable forms of speech. These problems can be minimized by giving strict warnings and suspensions to students and teachers who don’t follow the rule. Sometimes, the most

effective way to combat hateful speech is to respond to it rather than suppress it. For instance, a white racist teacher might discriminate against Asian American students by giving them lower grades than they have earned, or, another teacher might say that Asian American students are better at math because he believes that. It is often difficult to confront a person who is engaging in discrimination. Such interaction is particularly difficult when a person engaging in discrimination holds actual or perceived power over the person at whom it is directed. In these situations the first thing a student should do is to try to speak to the student or a teacher whom he/she believes is engaging in discrimination, in person or by email or a letter, and at least attempt to resolve the matter without further intervention. If a school considers the speech to be excessively lewd and vulgar, it may prohibit that speech in the form of speech codes. College speech codes should address “sexism”. The problem of unwelcome sexual attention on campus is a matter of subtle behavior — sexual teasing, off-color jokes, and comments about someone’s look that may not be intended to harass anyone. Based on some standards such actions add up to creating a hostile environment for students. Incidents of this kind in students’ life are more complex because they involve different perceptions of the same behavior. For example, one student may think that repeatedly criticizing some other student’s appearance may be funny; at the same time the student may get offended and it can harm his academic performance. It appears that there is a spectrum of what may be styled “permissible speech” on campus, and one may say anything one wants, within this spectrum. Freedom of speech is therefore sometimes at odds with various

social interests and values but school administrators must exercise care in how far they go in regulating free speech on campus.