

**Testimony of Zachary R. Wood**

Author of *Uncensored: My Life and Uncomfortable  
Conversations at the Intersection of Black and  
White America*

Before the United States House Committee on  
Education and the Workforce

Hearing: Examining First Amendment Rights on  
Campus

September 26, 2018

Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and Distinguished Members of the Committee, I am honored to have the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Zach Wood. I am an editor at *The Guardian* and a recent graduate of Williams College, where I served for three years as president of Uncomfortable Learning. I identify as a liberal democrat who supports many progressive causes.

I believe a college education should challenge students to grapple with unsettling ideas. I believe America's colleges should foster critical thinking, exemplify the pursuit of knowledge, and help prepare students to contribute meaningfully to society. I believe a college campus should be conducive to challenging conversations about pressing issues of our time.

When I arrived at Williams College, I was eager to explore the world of ideas. I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of humanity and the many challenges facing our world. I wanted to learn more about disagreeable perspectives. I wanted to push my intellectual limits and use my education to become a better listener, a better thinker, and a better citizen.

Unfortunately, it wasn't long before I realized that many of my peers and professors dismissed ideas that challenged their worldview, particularly on issues of race, class, and gender.

Deeply disappointed by this, I joined Uncomfortable Learning with the aim of stimulating thoughtful discussion and energetic debate of complicated issues.

As president of Uncomfortable Learning at Williams, I advocated for the value of engaging with contentious topics and offensive views on college campuses. To promote this kind of dialogue, I invited speakers with conservative, provocative, and unpleasant ideas.

This work was not easy, but I cared deeply about my education and I felt determined to do everything in my power to improve the quality of intellectual discourse at Williams.

Surely enough, my efforts were met with vehement resistance.

Minutes after announcing speakers on Facebook, I received incendiary attacks from my peers. I've been called "a sexist pig," "a men's rights activist," a "sellout," and a "traitor to my race." Some even went so far as to make implicit threats, posting on Facebook that "they needed the oil and the switch to deal with [me] in this midnight hour." In one extreme case, I received a hand-written note, slid under my door, that read: "your blood will be on the leaves."

I was troubled by the personal attacks. I believe my peers should have been more civil in expressing their disagreement, but I am most critical of my college administration, particularly my former college president, Adam F. Falk.

During my sophomore year, president Falk unilaterally banned from Williams a speaker I invited because of his inflammatory remarks about race. I defended my position: that on a college campus, students should be free to interrogate difficult ideas precisely because doing so can be a valuable learning experience.

Frustrated, a Williams administrator in the Office of Student Life told me, "Zach, Adam Falk is the president of this college. He's the boss and I've spoken with him. You best be careful what you write about how you disagree with him. Is that clear to you?"

Shortly after, I saw president Falk at a basketball game. I walked up, extended my hand and said, "Hello, president Falk." He made fleeting eye contact, put his head down, and swiftly walked away.

I thought we could shake hands; agree to disagree, respectfully.

Clearly, I was wrong.

Make no mistake: I understand that president Falk had a demanding job with many responsibilities, some of which I am sure can only be appreciated by those who have been in his position.

I deeply disagree with Dr. Falk's disinvitation and his response to campus controversy. I believe he misrepresented events he never attended, events that I organized and oversaw, when he wrote in *The Washington Post* last November that today's Williams students listen closely to opposing views.

I believe that in characterizing Williams as a beacon of free speech, Dr. Falk chose to ignore ad hominem attacks I and other students faced. I believe that in describing student life, he disregarded the experience of conservative students at Williams who avoid speaking in class in fear of being vilified by their professors.

I part company with Dr. Falk on these matters, but I understand his prerogative, as president of a private college, to ban speech he finds harmful. What I object to unequivocally is the idea that any college administrator should try to intimidate a student for confronting opposing views in search of honest debate.

My experience with president Falk and my administration attest to the state of free speech in higher education. We cannot improve it, if we do not acknowledge that some educators and administrators should do better by their students.

Zachary R. Wood, author of *Uncensored: My Life and Uncomfortable Conversations at the Intersection of Black and White America*, is a columnist and assistant opinion editor at *The Guardian*, a former Robert L. Bartley Fellow at *The Wall Street Journal*, and a class of 2018 graduate of Williams College. His recent work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The*

*Washington Post, New York Post, The Guardian, The Huffington Post, The Nation, The Weekly Standard, Times Higher Education, and Inside Higher Ed.*  
A Washington, DC, native, Wood currently resides in New York City.