



**Opening Statement of Rep. Burgess Owens (R-UT), Chairman
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development Hearing:
“Diversity of Thought: Protecting Free Speech on College Campuses”
March 29, 2023**

(As prepared for delivery)

What our young men and women practice and learn at colleges and universities will impact our nations for generations to come far beyond their own careers. How today’s students are taught or not taught to listen to new ideas and debate with those who they disagree with, will ultimately carry into their interactions and practices in Fortune 500 companies, academia, the arts, their families and even into the halls of Congress. Freedom of speech is a constitutionally protected God-given Right ensconced in our founding documents. Far too many higher education institutions claim to uphold this right, accept funding from the American taxpayer and then purposefully turn their backs and betray us.

Our witnesses today have extensive personal experience defending the right for all viewpoints to be heard.

The experiences of our witnesses and growing mountains of evidence regularly appearing in the news, paint a dire picture of the state of free expression in postsecondary education. The American people watch with shock as video after video emerge of mobs of radicalized students attacking anyone with an “opinion” NOT aligned with theirs. These students are trained in college classrooms that bullying of others is totally acceptable. That attacking others while HIDING anonymously in the midst of a group or behind a mask is virtuous. This is NOT virtue but instead the height of cowardice.

These cowardly attacks extend to their fellow colleagues who feel they have a right to express and debate their earnest beliefs, to faculty attempting to voice their own

ideas beyond the confines of critical race theory, and most recently and shockingly, the heckling of a federal appellate judge who was invited to speak at a law school.

Those who do not conform to the mob's thoughts and words are quickly taught: “you are not welcome here.”

The ability to speak freely to build one’s knowledge is a cornerstone of the American system of postsecondary education. And when our universities do nothing to safeguard free speech from classroom radicalized students, our future as a free Nation is at stake.

I will leave the many appalling details of recent attacks on speech to our witnesses, but I would like to make one more point.

Movements to threaten speech have occurred before. If those with certain views are allowed to shut down competing views, the battle to sustain freedoms upon which our country was founded – free speech, free thought, and free expression – will be lost.

In today’s era, universities have latched onto the advancement of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) as an ideal for campuses, which is plainly stamped on college websites and spelled out in university codes.

While colleges and universities may choose to focus on DEI, I would caution that the line is crossed when they obligate and demand faculty and students to sign on to their belief in these principles.

In fact, many universities require signed “Diversity Statements,” which are often a determining factor in student admissions, faculty hiring, and tenure promotion. These statements act as a political litmus test. They insist on a commitment to certain views and imply that prospective applicants will not be considered if they don’t sufficiently advocate for the same beliefs. Let me remind everyone listening. We live in the Free Land of America, not Communist China, Cuba, North Korea or Russia.

With all the pressure to conform or avoid saying the wrong thing, it's also no wonder that over half of students self-censor. Universities are increasingly minimizing the viewpoints of those with beliefs deemed unacceptable.

An entire generation of young academics must tailor their work to a prescribed agenda or face professional purgatory. Even professors with tenure are no longer safe as elite Leftist-run universities continue to fire and threaten long standing scholars over "wrong-think."

American postsecondary education thrives when people from different backgrounds and perspectives are encouraged to express themselves. To foster a healthy environment for intellectual diversity, the American university system needs to focus on the purpose of education: The pursuit of truth.

This committee should explore possible legislative avenues to create the right incentives to remind universities of the trust we give them when we fund them through our tax dollars. That trust is to NOT be an adversary to our sacred free speech rights but to protect it. My colleagues and I have the delicate job of considering how to ensure compliance through enforcement mechanisms that our law currently lacks.

The role of the American government has always been to defend the freedom of its citizens. This committee will not and our fellow Americans should not look the other way as millions of students and great minds are silenced, disinvited, or forced to adopt beliefs antithetical to the Constitution because of a vocal minority of bullies. We're working to return to the good ole days when our students were taught to say with confidence "Let's Respectfully Agree to Disagree" and continue to debate another day.

With that, I look forward to the hearing today and yield to the ranking member.

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