

Opening Statement of Rep. Burgess Owens (R-UT)  
Higher Education and Workforce Development Subcommittee  
“Speech or Silence? The Future of the First Amendment in Higher  
Education”  
April 29, 2026

(As prepared for delivery)

Colleges and universities should strive to cultivate intellectual diversity on campus by exposing students to new, and sometimes controversial, ideas they may not agree with.

This mission is becoming increasingly urgent as students report increasing intolerance to views that differ from their own.

According to the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), 59 percent of students self-censor around other students at least once or twice a month.

Even more concerning, 71 percent believe it is acceptable to shout down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus.

Fifty-four percent would accept blocking other students from attending a campus speech, and 34 percent believe using violence to stop a speech is justified.

This trend toward intolerance has serious implications for higher education, as well as for the well-being of our republic and our nation’s

role in the world. We saw that just this weekend with yet another attempted assassination of President Trump and his cabinet. Sadly, in my state of Utah, we saw this when Charlie Kirk was murdered.

College students have clear rights on campuses. Public universities must uphold the First Amendment, and private universities must abide by their own stated free speech policies.

In addition, public universities must protect students' other First Amendment freedoms, including the freedom to assemble and the freedom from religious persecution.

Yet these protections are not always upheld. Students in certain religious, political, and single-sex organizations often pay the price.

Today we'll hear about challenges students are facing regarding their First Amendment rights.

We'll also discuss how well colleges and universities are upholding these protections, highlighting both successes and shortcomings, and explore how they can strengthen their policies moving forward.

Protecting free expression is essential not only to the educational mission of our schools, but also to the continued strength of our nation.

I look forward to exploring ways colleges, universities, and Congress can better support students in exercising their First Amendment rights.