



Political Correctness Is Not the Problem, Systemic Racism Is

Council on Anthropology and Education

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In recent years, we have witnessed a resurgence of student protests on college campuses in the US and beyond. Many of these protests, inspired by broader contemporary social movements including [#BlackLivesMatter](#), [#StandingRock](#)/[#NoDAPL](#), and [#RhodesMustFall](#), have focused on challenging systemic racism and other forms of marginalization on campuses. Conservative and liberal critics alike have criticized these protests, [lamenting a supposed culture of political correctness](#) that has created overly sensitive college students unable to cope with differing opinions. That is, student activists seeking to dismantle systemic racism are accused of being unable to grapple with a diversity of opinions. A proposed solution to alleged attacks on a diversity of intellectual opinions is to engage in respectful debate with those who hold opposing viewpoints in the name of free speech.

What might appear to be a respectful debate that includes a diversity of opinions can in fact serve to reproduce systemic racism.

On one level, this solution appears completely reasonable. Who could object to defending free speech and engaging in respectful debate? However, this framing of the debate prevents an interrogation of the historical power relations that structure the terms and stakes of participation. What might appear to be a respectful debate that includes a diversity of opinions can in fact serve to reproduce systemic racism. After all, freedom of speech was inscribed into the US Constitution in concert with the displacement and genocide of indigenous populations and the continued reliance on slavery to build the economy of the newly formed nation-state. One could imagine during this time period, two property-owning white men—the normative political subjects whose rights the constitution was designed to endow and protect—respectfully debating the merits of slavery before

shaking hands and going their separate ways. One could also imagine the white man who opposed slavery defending the right to free speech of his pro-slavery friend in the face of protest by abolitionists. Meanwhile, Africans remained enslaved with their perspectives completely absent from mainstream debates on slavery. Enslaved Africans who escaped and subsequently decided to speak out against slavery risked losing their freedom once again.

We begin with this pointed example to question framings of free speech that suggest that everyone is entitled to their opinions and should have a platform for expressing these opinions without interruption. Debates on slavery and other institutions rooted in systemic racism contribute to the perpetuation of violence against communities of color who are the targets of these institutional power structures. These structures are often framed as historical relics beyond which societies have collectively moved. Student protestors reject this narrative and seek to bring attention to the ways that these institutional power structures permeate contemporary institutions in ways that continue to produce profound disparities. For these student protestors, the problem confronting higher education is not the encroachment on free speech or the imposition of political correctness. Instead, the challenge is transforming institutions that have inherited a legacy of systemic racism into spaces that are truly anti-racist. This project of creating anti-racist institutions requires a careful examination of the fundamental logics that privilege or marginalize particular modes of institutional participation and communication.



Northwestern University students protest the visit of an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer.
Colin Boyle/The Daily Northwestern

This challenge is demonstrated by a recent incident at Northwestern University where students **protested a professor's invitation of an ICE official to speak to their class**. As has become the norm in response to student protests, this incident was dominantly framed as an encroachment on the free speech of the ICE official. **The faculty senate condemned the student protestors** as infringing on free speech and encouraged students to be open to diverse opinions. Yet, it is unclear how the free speech of the ICE official was being infringed upon. To our knowledge, the ICE official did not face institutional censorship or other negative consequences for expressing ICE positions. In fact,

the ICE perspective, which perpetuates the criminalization of (im)migrant communities, is aligned with the dominant view expressed in mass media and other mainstream discourses. In contrast, the

faculty senate encouraged the school to make students aware of possible consequences for their protests. Thus, we must reconsider whose free speech was infringed upon in this situation.

Yet, framing the issue solely as a question of freedom of speech misses the bigger picture—indeed, the bigger challenge—confronting institutions of higher education. Focusing on the historical and contemporary institutional patterns of marginalization faced by people of color in higher education, the more pertinent question becomes whether a professor who might have undocumented students in their class and definitely has undocumented students on their campus should be providing a platform for ICE officials to express their opinions in their classroom. What does having an ICE official in class mean for the free speech of the undocumented students in the class or on campus? How does it legitimize the state violence that ICE perpetuates against (im)migrant communities around the country? Framed more broadly, how can institutions of higher education strive to be places that are inclusive of their most marginalized students if they ally themselves with state actors and other mainstream figures whose primary mission is to contribute to the continued marginalization of these students?

Responses to their demands must shift from empty affirmations of free speech and superficial diversity rhetoric to a focus on comprehensively transforming institutions in ways that undo systemic racism.

Institutions of higher education are more racially diverse than they have ever been. This is a product of a previous generation of students of color and their allies who pushed for the diversification of the student body and faculty along with a diversification of the curriculum. Many of these activists were also accused of infringing on the free speech of their opponents who sought to maintain the status quo, which was premised on the systematic exclusion of students and faculty of color. Yet, these activists continued their struggle and opened the gates for a new generation of students of color and their allies who continue to push these institutions to fulfill their stated missions of being inclusive of all students. Responses to their demands must shift from empty affirmations of free speech and superficial diversity rhetoric to a focus on comprehensively transforming institutions in ways that undo systemic racism.

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Nancy H Hornberger says:

August 28, 2017 at 12:22 pm

Lovely to see this — thank you, Nelson and Jonathan (and hi, Bradley)!

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Bradley Levinson says:

August 17, 2017 at 11:09 pm

Bravo! A much-needed corrective to the facile moral relativism of the 'free speech' advocates on campus, which is what the Northwestern faculty senate imagined themselves to be. We faced a similar situation here at Indiana University, when Charles Murray came to speak last April. Those of us who protested his talk and chastised the university administration for approving and subsidizing it were largely characterized as PC tyrants with no tolerance of "other views." Yet when these "other views" and the speech that purveys them categorically deny the humanity

of members of the local and global community, then they constitute an existential threat. They are, in effect, a form of hate speech—and yes, the very acceptance of them reproduces the systemic racism that provides the specious condition of “free and equal speech.”

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