

KEY
TAKEAWAYS

Students and Freedom of Expression on Campus



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**THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®**

**FREE SPEECH IS
IMPORTANT TO
STUDENTS.**

**DO THEY
THINK IT'S
SECURE?**

College students place a high value on the principles of free speech. But over the last five years, they've become anxious about the state of free speech in America.

The latest report from Knight Foundation's Free Expression (KFX) Research Series shows that **84% of students see free speech rights as essential to democracy. But just 47% of them believe free speech is secure in today's society** — a decline of 26 percentage points since 2016.

Knight shares research on students' views of free expression to track these important

trends. Our work aims to help educators promote free speech while building inclusive campuses that welcome all.

Accomplishing these goals isn't easy. Our new report makes clear that students of color — especially Black students — feel their speech is far less protected than others.

We hope our latest findings can help you understand students' evolving views as you build the best learning environments for all.



Visit **KF.org/KFXCOLLEGE**

to explore the latest trends. And stay tuned for our study of high school students, coming later this year.



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Today's students are challenging free-speech norms and are more likely than older generations to support restrictions on offensive speech. Meanwhile, the rise of social media, new sexual-harassment policies, and demands for more racial diversity and inclusiveness have sometimes complicated free expression on campus.

The Chronicle, with support from the Knight Foundation, recently hosted a virtual forum, “**Students and Freedom of Expression on Campus.**” Moderated by Len Gutkin, a senior editor at *The Review*, the forum’s panel included Amna Khalid, an associate professor of history at Carleton College, in Minnesota; Eduardo Peñalver, president of Seattle University and a legal scholar; Michael S. Roth, president of Wesleyan University, in Connecticut, and a historian; and Robert Sellers, vice provost for equity and inclusion, chief diversity officer, and a professor of psychology and education at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. The robust discussion was itself an exercise in free speech, as panelists debated questions like these: How do college leaders respond to claims that their institutions have become unwelcoming places for certain views? And how can they mitigate potential conflicts when they do arise?

The following comments, which have been edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full, hourlong discussion, you can listen to the archived version [here](#).

Len Gutkin: Michael Roth, you wrote a book called *Safe Enough Spaces* in which you try hard to turn the temperature down on some of the polarizing debates about the political culture of college campuses now. What’s worked for you as president at Wesleyan?

Michael Roth: The college campus and especially the classroom need to be safe enough so you can be uncomfortable and deal with dangerous ideas and really fraught issues about which reasonable people disagree.

How do you turn the temperature down? My notion is very old-fashioned. You ask your students, Why do you think other people (who you would normally demonize) take this point of view? You ask them to argue from someone else’s perspective, which encourages them not only to learn the art of debate but to become active listeners.



Len Gutkin

Senior Editor,
The Chronicle of Higher Education



Michael S. Roth

President,
Wesleyan University

Amna Khalid: I am completely in agreement with Michael that of course we want spaces that are physically safe — where people don't feel harassed. But we're in this moment where the idea that words can harm has become part of the texture of public discourse. And that is where we get into difficult waters. Who gets to define what is harmful?

Of course words harm. Having been the recipient of harmful words myself, I'm well aware. But if we are going to adjudicate which words are harmful, then we really do begin to infringe upon academic freedom.

Roth: Wouldn't that be true of harmful gestures, though?

Khalid: I think it would be true of harmful gestures. On your campus, would you prevent a student from giving someone the middle finger?

Roth: From student to student? Probably not. But would I prevent a faculty member from rubbing a student's butt? Yeah.

Khalid: Psychological harm is real. But where exactly should an institution of higher learning start adjudicating that? That's a very, very messy question.

Eduardo Peñalver: I was intrigued by the concept of the "safe-enough space" in thinking about giving students the power to insert or extract themselves from situations where they're more likely to encounter words or ideas they perceive as inflicting harm, and in thinking about the different kinds of spaces that we can create where students from different backgrounds and identities can feel like they're not going to have to defend [themselves] all the time. Then they can venture out and have the power to engage in the intellectual combat that's part of the learning experience in the university.

Robert Sellers: One of the things that is happening now is that voices who have traditionally not had access to higher education — that has led to a very different set of notions with regards to what an idealized picture of freedom of speech means. Freedom of speech is particularly valuable if and only if you also have a strong sense of personal safety.

We're dealing with communities that look very different than



Amna Khalid

Associate Professor of History,
Carleton College



Eduardo Peñalver

President,
Seattle University

they have historically looked, and some of the things that we've automatically taken for granted as core values aren't as core.

Khalid: I welcome the fact that there are diverse voices on campus. But that diversity is valued precisely so we can hear different points of view — and some of them will be offensive. It behooves us in the academy to create a space where we can have a conversation about even offensive ideas in such a way that we can get past the offense. Academic freedom is vital to help us deal with precisely the kind of contentious and difficult ideas that some people might want to shut down because they can cause harm or offense.

Peñalver: What we perceive as unsafe or harmful is in part going to depend on the kind of experiences we've had. The more experience we've had with intellectual disagreement, maybe the less threatened we are with the fact of disagreement or by the expression of points of view we disagree with.

Roth: One of the things that's so important is to build resilience in this regard — so that people are able to explore things that they might not have wanted to explore before. We had a big controversy at Wesleyan about [a note](#) I sent to the board and the student body, “Black Lives Matter and So Does Free Speech,” when we had a controversy over an article in a newspaper here. Jelani Cobb [wrote a piece](#) in *The New Yorker* about how free speech is often a cover for racism. I didn't know him, but I asked him if he would come to Wesleyan to talk about that. I invited Judith Butler to give a talk that was canceled because she's associated with boycotts against Israel. I'm against that boycott, but I think she should talk. That, I think, did more on our campus than any kind of arguing over free speech — the display of active disagreement about ideas that matter.

Gutkin: Eduardo Peñalver, you [recently reviewed for us](#) the Columbia linguist John McWhorter's new book, about what he calls “woke racism.” McWhorter makes a lot of campus incidents that, depending on your ideological commitments, might seem either importantly symptomatic of something having gone deeply wrong, or like stuff that's been blown out of all proportion. I'm thinking of things like a professor being



Robert Sellers

Vice Provost for Equity and Inclusion,
University of Michigan at Ann Arbor

disciplined for saying the N-word out loud while reading James Baldwin to his class — something Randall Kennedy [wrote about for us](#).

Peñalver: We have a problem, but the problem is not on campus. We have to remove ourselves from the frame that’s being imposed by right-wing media, which have an agenda to undermine higher education and portray this as some cultural problem. We’re reflecting it back in the same way other sectors of our society are, but we’re in a position to do something about it, and we care about it. The fact that we talk about the same anecdotes over and over suggests that they’re limited in number, but there have been mistakes that administrators have made in responding to student demands.

Khalid: We now have right-wing people using precisely that discourse of safe spaces to shut down conversation. And this is exactly the trouble I have with that kind of discourse. Tomorrow people are going to say that Black Lives Matter activists on campus are making us uncomfortable.

I think you’re quite right to point out that the numbers are limited. But these numbers create an atmosphere in which people feel that they cannot speak up.

Roth: There’s a return to a sort of free-market approach to free speech. That free-market approach is not effective in an arena of manufactured pollution that is forced into the public sphere, just as the free-market approach to economics is not going to work when you have significant industrial pollution. You need regulation. You need intelligent curation. That’s where colleges can play a really interesting role — they can create artificial arenas of perspective-taking.

You need thoughtful approaches that allow for dissension, disagreement, resilience building — and for self-censorship! I don’t know what’s so bad about self-censorship. Queer people, Black people, and Jews have been doing this.

Khalid: I disagree! We all self-censor. But there’s self-censorship which is basic politeness, and then there’s self-censorship which is out of fear of putting something out there that could advance the conversation. And that is the self-censorship I think is deeply dangerous.

“You need thoughtful approaches that allow for dissension, disagreement, resilience building — and for self-censorship!”

Sellers: I don't think anyone here would disagree that universities should be a place where people can have ideas that are of some intellectual value that may be divergent from each other and might even be problematic. On the other hand, I don't think there's anyone on this panel who would disagree that speech that is attacking, that is demeaning, that is intentionally designed to inflict harm, doesn't have a place. And part of what determines whether some speech should or shouldn't be regulated has to do with what you believe the intent actually is — which again goes back to the question of who gets to determine that. And that's where the rub really lies.

Gutkin: If you could change one thing about the debate over free expression, both in the country and on college campuses, what would you change?

Khalid: I would love for students to feel empowered to actually take each other on and take their professors on in an appropriate fashion to contest these ideas, as I thought originally the space of the university was meant to do.

Peñalver: I would change the framing from a conversation about campus to a conversation about our society in the context of polarization and social media, and see campuses as the laboratories where we're looking for how we can live together. I'm fundamentally optimistic that we will find the solution.

Roth: I would de-emphasize freedom of expression and emphasize freedom to actively listen and to develop skills for listening, rather than skills for screaming or tweeting or posting.

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