



When thought control and cancel culture overtake academia

How the Philadelphia Statement underscores the need for tolerance and robust debate

By Peter Wood and Pete Peterson, August 11, 2020

“Cancel culture” has taken a toll on newspaper editors, actors, CEOs and professors, with no real sign of stopping anytime soon. If there are encouraging signs, it is that there has been a recent flurry of public declarations about the importance of freedom of expression and speech to the flourishing of our civic institutions following each successful dethronement. In no sphere have these statements come more fast or so furiously as academia.

That is because academia’s proudest boast for the last hundred years has been its devotion to free inquiry. These days, however, it is hard to keep up with the instances of faculty members denounced and often punished for thought-crimes. Significant

numbers of academics have, in effect, made a U-turn on free speech. Instead, they now favor censoring those whose views — past or present — can no longer be “tolerated.”

Exhibit A: The “Faculty Letter” to the president of Princeton University from some 250 faculty members and students demanding a committee to preview all faculty research and publication to ensure that it comports with their ideas about how to fight racism. The Princeton letter has attracted a lot of attention, but it has counterparts at many colleges and universities where a vocal minority has summoned the spirit of collective control over what can be thought and said.

The voices of censorship often have an echo in the university’s top leadership. In the wake of the death of George Floyd while in Minneapolis police custody, many college and university presidents issued statements elevating “antiracism” over every other aspect of higher education. Proposals for new curricula proliferated along with calls for research reviews, new hiring processes and staff training — all with little to no deliberation.

Few care to examine whether these directives will cure the alleged problems. They just might, like an ill-advised surgery, make the patient worse. It is a short step from “antiracism” to using any accusation of racism — however unfounded and unfair — to silence and ostracize anyone who dissents from a currently popular opinion.

Many of the critical responses to the new calls for censorship have been thoughtful. They are grounded in the timeless qualities that have made American universities such important learning communities that, to borrow from Harvard’s “Mission Statement,” prepare “citizens and citizen-leaders for our society.”

To the Princeton proclamation, classics Professor Joshua T. Katz, retorted, “Independence of thought is considered the hallmark of academia, but everyone deserves it. In the United States, thank heavens, freedom to think for oneself is still a right, not a privilege.”

At Brown University, the president issued a “Letter from Brown’s senior leaders: Confronting racial injustice,” which included this line describing the signers’ feelings regarding current events: “The anger comes from knowing that we have been here before, and in fact have never left.”

Dr. Glenn Loury, an economics professor at the university, rejoined, “What I found most alarming, though, is that no voice was given to what one might have thought would be a university’s principal intellectual contribution to the national debate at this critical moment: namely, to affirm the primacy of reason over violence in calibrating our reactions to the supposed ‘oppression.’” This is, indeed, the time when academia could and should be playing its centuries-old role to convene civic and open dialogue about the challenges confronting our nation — from race relations to the public policies that best respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, many American colleges and universities have instead helped to shut down debate in the classroom. They have also chilled research and discouraged professors from presenting dissenting ideas to the general public. A blanket of ideological conformity now covers most campuses. As two people engaged in the defense of the basic principles of Western civilization in higher education — one through a national organization, and the other at a graduate policy school — we are signatories to a new declaration of the importance of robust but civilized debate in our society: the “Philadelphia Statement: On Civil Discourse and the Strengthening of Liberal Democracy.” We support this statement because we believe that, despite its faults, American higher education can still help to restore America’s center of gravity. As a nation we need to re-learn how to tolerate views we dislike and how to debate people with whom we disagree. The “Philadelphia Statement” points the way.

Cosigned by academics, policy-researchers and faith leaders, this nonpartisan declaration warns, “A society that lacks comity and allows people to be shamed or intimidated into self-censorship of their ideas and considered judgments will not survive for long.” Threats to free and civil discourse now mar almost every American institution.

We believe that by returning to its foundational commitments, higher education can change our culture for the better. The Constitutional Convention of 1787 was memorably described by Catherine Drinker Bowen as the “Miracle in Philadelphia.” Nearly two-and-a-half centuries later, we’d settle for this “Signal on the Schuylkill” to reaffirm our national commitment to viewpoint diversity and civic dialogue.

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