

Freedom of Speech on Campus

In the fall of 2015, student groups on the campuses of the University of Missouri and Yale University led protests in the wake of a series of racially-motivated offenses that many students saw as part of a history of unsafe or hostile campus climates for students of color, particularly black students. Offenses included verbal, emotional, and physical abuse.

At Yale University, administrators sent an email to students that offered advice on racially-insensitive costumes to avoid for Halloween, including costumes featuring blackface or mock Native American headdresses. Controversy emerged after Erika Christakis, a white lecturer of early childhood education and associate master at one of the university's residential colleges, sent an email to the students she resided over in which she objected to the call for sensitivity. Christakis debated what she described as an "institutional... exercise of implied control over college students," asking, "Is there no room anymore for a child or young person to be a little bit obnoxious... a little bit inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive?" In response, many students signed an open letter to Christakis. In this letter they stated, "We are not asking to be coddled... [We] simply ask that our existences not be invalidated on campus. This is us asking for basic respect of our cultures and our livelihoods." During a protest, a student confronted Christakis's husband, Nicholas Christakis, a professor at Yale and master of one of the residential colleges. In disagreement, the students told him to step down, saying that being a master was "not about creating an intellectual space... [but] creating a home here."

At Missouri, university administrators were criticized for their slow and ineffective responses to address ongoing racial tensions on the campus. After Payton Head, a black student and president of the Missouri Student Association, was taunted with racial slurs, it took university chancellor R. Bowen Loftin nearly a week to respond. Following this and other incidences, students organized rallies and demonstrations. Tensions were made worse after someone used feces to smear a swastika on a communal bathroom in a residence hall. This act of vandalism, and the university's response, became the final straw for graduate student Jonathan Butler. Butler had led or been involved in many demonstrations up to this point. He decided to go on indefinite hunger strike until university system president, Tim Wolfe, was removed from office. In support of Butler, the football team later announced they would neither practice nor play until Wolfe resigned. Many students joined in support of the protests. Butler ended his weeklong hunger strike after Wolfe resigned.

In the midst of the student protests at Missouri, further controversy emerged when protesters tried to keep news media out of the campus public grounds where protesters had been camping out for days. Student photographer Tim Tai, on assignment for ESPN, was surrounded and confronted by protesters, including university staff members, who did not want any media to enter what they said was a "safe space." Tai was attempting to document the protests in public spaces, stating, "This is the First Amendment that protects your right to stand here and mine. ...The law protects both of us." A video capturing



the confrontation went viral and sparked wider debate over the issue of freedom of speech in the protests at Missouri, Yale, and other college campuses. Journalists, commentators, and academics raised discussion over the roles of free speech, deliberation, and tolerance in the dialogue between student activists and university administrators.

Freelance journalist Terrell Jermaine Starr, in defense of the protesters, wrote: “This wasn’t a problem with Tai’s character or his journalistic integrity; he was doing his job... but reporters should also feel a responsibility to try to understand and respect [the protesters’] pain...” Starr continued: “In many communities that historically have been marginalized and unfairly portrayed by the media, there’s good reason people do not trust journalists: They often criminalize black people’s pain and resistance to racial oppression.” Suzanne Nossel, executive director of PEN American Center, defended free speech as a crucial driver of social justice reform: “[Without] free speech, the “safe spaces” students crave will soon suffocate them. Social movements must evolve or they die. Ideological and even tactical evolution demands willingness to hear out heterodoxy. Likewise, free speech defenders will not win by dismissing students as insolent whiners. ...The Black Lives Matter movement and the campus protests are efforts to jump-start a drive for racial equality that has stalled in key areas. Free speech is essential to that quest.”

Writing about the Yale incident, journalist Conor Friedersdorf suggested that the student activists’ intolerance of other views could lead to censorship. He wrote, “[Students] were perfectly free to talk about their pain. Some felt entitled to something more, and that is what prolonged the debate.” Op-ed columnist Nicholas Kristof addressed the broader role of freedom of speech on college campuses: “The protesters at Mizzou and Yale and elsewhere make a legitimate point: Universities should work harder to make all students feel they are safe and belong. Members of minorities—whether black or transgender or (on many campuses) evangelical conservatives—should be able to feel a part of campus, not feel mocked in their own community.” Political theorist Danielle Allen, on the other hand, described the debate over freedom of speech as a distraction from the key issues of the protests. Allen wrote, “The issues of free speech matter, too, but they are leading people in the wrong direction, away from the deepest issue. ...The real issue is how to think about social equality.”

Discussion Questions:

1. In this case study, who voiced his or her values? Do you think each of these people acted effectively? Why or why not?
2. Think through the seven pillars of GVV in relation to Erika Christakis' actions. Can you identify each pillar in her actions? Are there any pillars that you think she could have engaged more effectively? Explain.
3. How do Erika Christakis' actions to voice values compare to Jonathan Butler's actions to voice values? Was one more effective than the other? Why or why not? Explain.
4. If you were in the position of a student activist at Yale or Missouri, what would you have done and why? How might the pillars of GVV influence your actions?
5. What if you were in the position of a university administrator at Yale or Missouri? What would you have done and why? How might the pillars of GVV influence your actions?
6. If you were in the position to mediate the conflict between Tim Tai and the protesters, how would you engage the GVV pillars to do so? Explain.
7. If you were in Tai's position, what would you have done, and why? Do you agree with his argument that freedom of speech protects his rights as much as it does the protesters? Explain.
8. How does voicing your own values differ from voicing the values of a group or organization? Explain.
9. Have you ever witnessed or been involved in a protest? In what ways did the group of protestors communicate their message? Do you think this was effective? Why or why not?
10. What do you think is an ethically ideal way to encourage dialogue and equality on college and university campuses? Explain.

Resources:

At University of Missouri, Black Students See a Campus Riven by Race

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/12/us/university-of-missouri-protests.html>

Why a Free Speech Fight is Causing Protests at Yale

<http://time.com/4106265/yale-students-protest/>

Mizzou, Yale, and Free Speech

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/12/opinion/mizzou-yale-and-free-speech.html>

‘Justice is worth fighting for’: A Q&A with the graduate student whose hunger strike has upended the University of Missouri

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/11/09/justice-is-worth-fighting-for-a-qa-with-the-graduate-student-whose-hunger-strike-has-upended-the-university-of-missouri/>

Who Is Entitled to Be Heard?

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/12/opinion/who-is-entitled-to-be-heard.html>

There’s a good reason protestors at the University of Missouri didn’t want the media around

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/11/11/theres-a-good-reason-protesters-at-the-university-of-missouri-didnt-want-the-media-around/>

The New Intolerance of Student Activism

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/the-new-intolerance-of-student-activism-at-yale/414810/>

The real issue at Mizzou and Yale isn’t free speech. It’s social equality.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-real-issue-at-mizzou-and-yale-isnt-free-speech-its-social-equality/2015/11/12/0ead3a34-8956-11e5-be8b-1ae2e4f50f76_story.html

At U. of Missouri and Yale, obstruction of free speech

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/at-u-of-missouri-and-yale-obstruction-of-free-speech/2015/11/10/1358563e-87f0-11e5-be39-0034bb576eee_story.html

A Dialogue on Race and Speech at Yale

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/03/yale-silliman-race/475152/>

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