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College students not intolerant of ideas

Dr. Aldemaro
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Letters from Academia

One of the current urban legends circulating about is that college students are intolerant to a diversity of views and have a selective attitude towards free speech. Epitomized by a few highly publicized cases highlighted in the media, especially conservative ones, the idea of intolerance as a feature at colleges and universities has now become part of the conventional wisdom. But, is it true?

As usually happens with legends, impressions may be just a reflection of a distorted reality.

According to a study carried out last year but published a few weeks ago by Gallup and the Knight Foundation, students' attitudes toward free speech shows support for open learning environments that protect free speech while promoting diversity and inclusion. The study was carried out by randomly surveying 3,014 U.S. college students from 39 public and private institutions across the U.S., including six historically black colleges or universities, to gain a sense of what those college students think about First Amendment issues. The results of the study challenge conventional wisdom.

For example, 70 percent of U.S. college students believe that offensive speech should be allowed for the sake of freedom of speech. That is down from 78 percent in 2016. Sixty-one percent said that their campus climate prevents certain groups from saying things because they might be seen as offensive, up from 54 percent the previous year.

But probably the most important statistic emerging from the study is that 90 percent said that protecting free speech rights is very important or extremely important, while 83 percent said promoting an inclusive society is very important or extremely important.

When it came to prioritizing, these col-

lege students ranked promoting an inclusive society over protecting free speech rights, 53 percent to 46 percent. About 65 percent of black students, Democrats and women chose a "diverse and inclusive" society over one protecting free speech rights, while 70 percent of Republican students favored free speech. Sixty-six percent of the voluntary respondents identified themselves as Democrats or Democrat-leaning.

Do comments students hear on campus in reference to their race, ethnicity, or religion make them feel uncomfortable? About 25 percent of all college students said yes, with about 43 percent of black students answering yes. This number is nearly double that of white students who answered yes. About 39 percent of all students who said that they felt uncomfortable participated in protests for diversity and inclusion in 2017.

These feelings generated different levels of reactions from students. Although most of them did not protest on their campus last year, among those who did 26 percent attended demonstrations regarding diversity and inclusivity while only 12 percent attended a protest related to free speech issues.

Interestingly enough, 61 percent of students said that they agree or strongly agree that the climate on their campus prevents some people from saying things they believe. That is up from 54 percent in the 2016 survey.

One of the factors that seems to influence the current climate about free speech

is – not surprisingly – social media.. Because of the lack of face-to-face communication or simply because of anonymity, people tend to say things that they would not under other circumstances. To begin with, 57 percent of students said in this poll that discussions on political issues are taking place online instead of face-to-face.

Thus, it is not surprising that more than 80 percent of students see social media as responsible for a rise in hate speech. And that makes a lot of people uncomfortable. Sixty-six percent of college students responding said schools should restrict hate speech, with 52 percent of Republicans favoring restrictions.

That does not mean that college students are well informed about their campus policies regarding this topic. Sixty percent of them said they were unsure about whether their college had a speech code, a free speech zone or had ever disinvited a speaker.

Furthermore, 73 percent of students said that they favor campus restrictions on offensive language such as slurs against groups, while 60 percent believe that stereotypical costumes, painted faces and the like should be banned. Not surprisingly, that measure is largely supported by African Americans, women and Democrats.

In these times of "fake news" parlance, unrestricted social media sources, and attention only to media that agree with people's political point of views, it is not surprising that the American public in general have had an increasing suspicion and even disdain towards conventional media outlets. In a 2016 Gallup poll, 32 percent say they have "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in media, with only 14 percent of Republicans expressing trust, down from 32 percent in 2015. Confidence in media also continues to drop among

younger and older Americans.

Yet it seems that in 2017, college students were not that distrustful of traditional news sources. In fact, 50 percent of students said they had "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in the news media, an 8 percent jump from the number reporting in 2016. However, it seems a factor behind those significant changes in attitudes has been the result of the last presidential elections. For example, before the 2016 elections Democrats and Republicans had similar views on the security of First Amendment freedoms. Since then, Democratic students are less likely to see those freedoms as secure in comparison with Republicans.

That may explain why a number of independent newspapers, such as The New York Times and The Washington Post, have seen their circulation numbers increase in spite of the ease to which their content can be viewed online. That increase in circulation seems to be propelled by Democrats, whose trust in the news media made a gigantic jump in just a year, from 44 to 64 percent. Republicans' trust in the news media, by contrast, has declined to an all-time low of 34 percent among college students.

All these statistics seem to indicate that U.S. college students struggle to find a balance between First Amendment rights and the curtailment of hate speech. Unfortunately, not that many campuses are taking significant steps in providing guidance in this area.

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