

Education

DeVos, Sessions warn of deepening free-speech crisis on college campuses

By [Moriah Balingit](#)

September 17, 2018

Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos warned Monday of a rising threat to free speech on college campuses, citing violent protests leading to the cancellation of controversial speakers. They also pointed to measures they said shield students from speech deemed hateful or offensive.

The two Cabinet members spoke at separate events on Constitution Day, which marks the anniversary of the signing of the founding document by delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787. Both said the crisis transcends free speech and said the notion of objective truth is under attack, with ideology taking precedence over facts.

“Today, freedom of speech and thought have come most under attack on the college campus. That should shock us,” Sessions said. Recalling a Thomas Jefferson quote in which he vowed to fight “every form of tyranny over the mind of man,” Sessions warned that some “have abandoned these principles.”

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“Perhaps most dangerously, they have abandoned principle and truth altogether,” he said.

Their remarks come as universities grapple with how to deal with controversial speakers or ideas, a predicament made more challenging amid widening political polarization and students’ pushback against speech they view as racist, sexist or homophobic. In some cases, universities have canceled or rescheduled events because of violent protests. And schools have been tested when extreme figures, such as white-nationalist leader Richard Spencer, want to speak on campus. Spencer espouses racist views and advocates for the creation of an all-white state.

Speaking at an event in Philadelphia, DeVos lamented that the “heckler’s veto” prevails on too many campuses, with students or protesters shutting down speeches by polarizing figures and with some universities charging student groups exorbitant fees for bringing in speakers “they deem to be controversial.”

“Too many administrators have been complicit in creating or facilitating a culture that makes it easier for the heckler to win,” DeVos said, addressing students.

Sessions has made campus free speech a cornerstone of the Justice Department’s work, intervening in lawsuits on behalf of students who allege schools violated their constitutional rights. The department intervened on behalf of Republican students at the University of California at Berkeley, whose event with conservative commentator Ann Coulter was canceled because of violent clashes on campus. It also filed briefs on behalf of students who were fighting their colleges’ “free-speech zones,” saying they limit free speech.

DeVos advocated for a hands-off approach by government. But in 2017, when protests over the right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos roiled the UC-Berkeley campus, President Trump threatened to revoke the school’s federal funds, writing on Twitter: “If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view — NO FEDERAL FUNDS?”

Monday, DeVos suggested that her department stay out of fights over free speech. The remedy to the problem is not “government muscle,” she said, adding, “A solution won’t come from defunding an institution of learning.”


The Education Department has expanded its definition of anti-Semitism, sparking concerns among some civil rights advocates who say it could be used to punish critics of Israel.

But some observers question whether a “free-speech crisis” exists. The American Council on Education, a higher-education organization, surveyed 471 college and university presidents this year and found 96 percent said allowing students to be exposed to all kinds of speech was more important than protecting them by banning offensive speech.

Other critics suggested the Trump administration was cherry-picking incidents to paint a skewed picture.

“The allegation of deviation of free-speech protections in isolated incidents does not suggest to me is that there is an epidemic of speech harm,” said Catherine Lhamon, who led the Education Department’s Office for Civil Rights under President Barack Obama.

Moriah Balingit

Moriah Balingit is an education reporter for The Washington Post, where she has worked since 2014. She previously covered crime, city hall and crime in city hall at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Follow 

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