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# There Is No Free Speech Crisis On Campus



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Politics



CHAPEL HILL, NC - AUGUST 22: A demonstrator gives the middle finger to sheriff deputies during a rally for the removal of a Confederate statue, coined Silent Sam, on the campus of the University of Chapel Hill on August 22, 2017 in Chapel Hill North Carolina. (Photo by Sara D. Davis/Getty Images)

“Chilling” is the word used in [the Washington Post headline](#) to describe college students’ supposed hostility to free speech. A new poll appears to indicate that 20% of college students believe it is appropriate to use violence to shut down hateful or offensive speakers. Thanks to a carefully orchestrated campaign, the notion that universities are hostile to the free exchange of ideas is slipping into mainstream opinion. It is a phony crisis manufactured by the same people who fuel the engines of climate denial. Right wing activists and donors are fighting to undermine universities because their values cannot thrive there. Modern

conservatism is failing on campus because it shrivels in an atmosphere of intelligent, open debate.

No one should be surprised to discover that the poll cited in that Washington Post opinion piece was funded by [the Koch brothers](#). Like any poll crafted to prove a point rather than to investigate a hypothesis, it has some serious flaws. In a well-worn tactic often used by climate denial experts, the poll was conducted by someone outside the field with no polling experience. John Villasenor's initial foray was [dogged by amateur errors](#), nobody cared. Accuracy is irrelevant. His click-bait results landed in the Washington Post, while being simultaneously spewed across the conservative media landscape. Comments pointing out the junk-science nature of the poll appeared in such lauded publications as [American Libraries](#), where it earned an entire paragraph of attention. That's how this works.

More interesting than the flaws in the poll's execution is the buried lede: the poll failed. Look behind the absurd headlines and the poll demonstrates the opposite conclusion. College students are much more open to free speech than the general public. If it's "chilling" that 20% of college students misunderstand free speech, what word should we use to describe the quarter of the American public and almost half of Republicans who support [censoring unfavorable media outlets](#). Also from this poll, the college students who identified as Democrats were more open to free speech than their Republican peers. And perhaps the most important lesson from these poll results: a carefully constructed poll can get a small minority of respondents to endorse almost anything.

There is no public space in America more open to diverse opinions than our college campuses. What we are seeing there is not a crisis of tolerance, but a stark collapse in support for the Party of Donald Trump among the cream of a rising generation.

In a rich marketplace of ideas, conservatives are failing, and they are not losing with dignity. Our phony free speech crisis is a pet theory of people triggered to sputtering outrage by a black man who fails to stand for the national anthem. Whining like pampered little snowflakes, they scramble to establish some form of "safe space," some preserve insulated from the intellectual competition that threatens to scour from them our future political landscape.

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Empirical data suggests that free speech is alive and well on campus, but what about the evidence of our eyes? Over the past year or so we've been treated to an escalating cycle of apparent violence aimed at conservatives. This is not an accident. It is engineered by the same class of wealthy donors who produced that poll. Campus riots are irresistible journalistic porn, flaming evidence to buttress our preconceived biases. Screaming crowds provide the proof missing from our data. There is little incentive to look beyond the frame to ask what is actually happening.

Having lost the battle of persuasion, and largely swept from the campus environment, right wing speakers have to be foisted onto universities from the outside. When characters like Ann Coulter, Milo Yiannopoulos, and Charles Murray appear on campus, their appearances are funded by extremist donors and their events are orchestrated by outside groups. Finding students among the organizers, attendees, protestors, or counter-protestors is a challenge. This is theater and the university is a prop.

There is virtually no support for, or interest in these events at the schools being targeted. At universities with tens of thousands of students, campus Republican organizations can seldom recruit more than a few dozen participants. For people too young to have ever sipped the cool, sweet waters of the whites'-only fountain, much of modern conservatism feels morally equivalent to Fascism or Communism – a repugnant, cultural cancer than can't be eradicated quickly enough. Conservatives aren't sending Ann Coulter to Berkeley as a missionary. They are sending her to get B-reel footage they can play in fundraising pitches to aging Alabamans. She is there to incite violence. If no one sets anything on fire, then they've failed.

Complaints about "kids these days" are as old as Socrates. Sometimes, however, the concerns have merit. We are experiencing an earthquake of sorts in university life and political conservatives are right to be worried about their future.

What is really happening on college campuses? Young Americans, exposed to some of the most intellectually open environments that have ever existed in a human society, are rejecting the values of [The Last Jim Crow Generation](#) to an almost unanimous extent. This trend extends beyond politics. Younger Americans are [making better, smarter, more morally admirable choices](#) than their parents and grandparents in almost every respect. Today's college students are less likely than their forebears to use illegal drugs, smoke cigarettes, or engage in dangerous or irresponsible sexual practices. They are less likely to get pregnant or marry early. Younger Americans are better informed, more tolerant of dissent, and less bigoted than older generations. They [even have higher average IQ's](#). Our political system is about to be rocked by a wider generation gap than we faced in the Sixties.

Is it lonely and isolating to be a Trump supporter on a college campus? Here's a better question: Why wouldn't it be? It is difficult to occupy an ideological position with little rational basis in a place where evidence-based intellectual persuasion is the dominant value. When you find that your ideas are unpersuasive in an atmosphere of open, fact-driven debate, the problem might be you.

*Chris Ladd, former GOP Precinct Committeeman, author of [The Politics of Crazy](#) and creator of [PoliticalOrphans](#).*



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For almost thirty years I was active in Republican politics. Most recently I spent ten years as a Republican precinct committeeman in suburban Chicago. I am a Texan in exile. While a college intern at the Texas Legislature I met a young Rick Perry, fresh off his switch ...

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