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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Alumni Unite For Freedom Of Speech

Many left-of-center professors now realize that they too can be brutally canceled by the mob.

By Stuart Taylor Jr. and Edward Yingling

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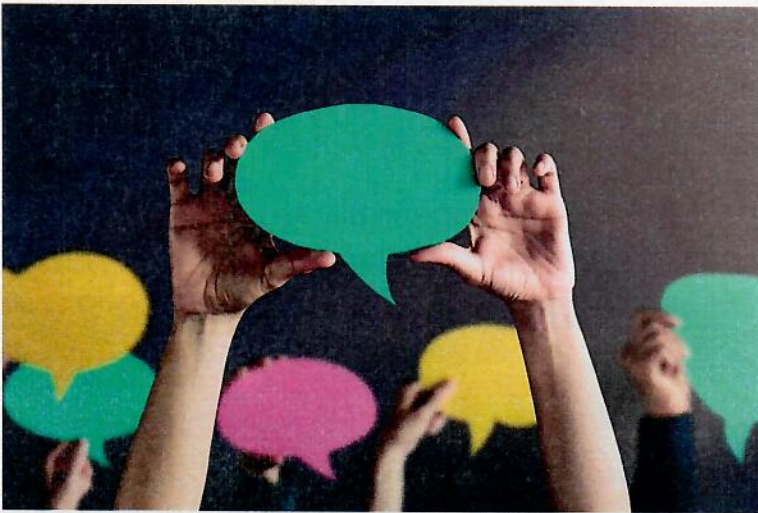


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Readers of these pages are well aware that free speech, academic freedom and viewpoint diversity are in big trouble at U.S. universities. But many of those worried over the state of campuses are almost resigned to the idea that the forces of illiberal intolerance have won. The fight is far from over. On Oct. 18, five alumni groups are announcing the creation of an organization to stand up for open inquiry: the Alumni Free Speech Alliance.

AFSA's founders are groups of graduates of Cornell University, Davidson College, Princeton University (our alma mater), the University of Virginia, and Washington and Lee University. Our allied organizations are the Cornell Free Speech Alliance, Davidsonians for Freedom of Thought and Discourse, Princetonians for Free Speech, the Jefferson Council (composed of UVA alumni) and the Generals Redoubt (W&L alumni).

AFSA's member groups are nonpartisan and will protect the rights of faculty and students across the ideological spectrum. The groups will pool ideas and information as well as promote and mentor similar groups of alumni from other schools. Our goal is to ally with scores of as-yet-unformed alumni groups around the country.

Why alumni? Because with rare exceptions, everyone else may feel too exposed to attacks to take a stand against campus culture. Our experience is that the few student free-speech groups don't have many members (Princeton's has about 20). Champions of free speech among faculty are badly outnumbered, even as many left-of-center professors are starting to realize that they too can be brutally canceled by the mob. Those few students and faculty who speak up often feel isolated and exposed.

University trustees, presidents and other administrators are also usually mired in the toxic campus environment, which responds to heresy with attacks. Most have either been cowed by or genuinely believe in a woke orthodoxy that sees free speech as an inconvenient disruption.

That leaves alumni as the only university stakeholders with the numbers and clout to lead the defense of free speech, academic freedom and viewpoint diversity in campus environments. Free speech and academic freedom are fundamental to the advancement of knowledge and to the success of our colleges and universities. Will all teaching and research at these schools soon be subject to a mandated orthodoxy? Will parents keep paying to send their children places where the fundamental elements of learning are suppressed? These institutions constantly seek alumni involvement and contributions. Alumni have the ability and duty to demand that their schools maintain the reasons for which they were created. But to be effective, alumni need to organize.

In a recent survey by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, more than 80% of students reported self-censoring their views at least some of the time, with 21% saying they censor themselves often. The survey, of more than 37,000 college students on 159 campuses, shows growing support among students for various forms of censorship, especially of conservative speakers, with 66% of students saying that shouting down speakers on campus may be justified. Other polls report similar results.

Tolerance for free speech among faculty appears to be marginally greater, but it is in decline; and left-tilted ideological litmus tests in faculty hiring have become common while moderate and conservative professors have become scarcer.

Hundreds of articles in numerous publications have reported on the harassment, suspension and even dismissal of faculty and students for expressing opinions, many quite reasonable, that offend woke activists. Meanwhile, university presidents often do nothing, even when their schools' free-speech rules would seem to require action.

Alumni—and that may include you—must act. Our five allied alumni groups stand ready to help.

Mr. Taylor is a Washington journalist and author. Mr. Yingling was president and CEO of the American Bankers Association. They are the co-founders of Princetonians for Free Speech.

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