

Freedoms We Celebrate

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As all of us have seen, college commencements are not assuredly times of joyful celebration, but can be occasions fraught with conflict and disagreement. In years past, William F. Buckley Jr. was protested at Vassar, President Obama at Notre Dame, Colin Powell at Harvard, and George Schultz at Princeton, among many others. In the last several weeks, four major institutions have seen their commencement speakers walk away or be rejected by the institution.

This season, at Rutgers, Smith, and my own college, Haverford, students threatened to protest or otherwise disrupt the event because they disagreed with the choice of an honoree or speaker, all of whom are eminent people with something important to say. At each of these schools, the invitation to speak was upheld, but the speaker withdrew in deference to the celebratory nature of the event. (What happened at Brandeis, where the invitation to Ayaan Hirsi Ali was revoked, is another matter altogether.)

What is at stake here? Is this about threats to free speech? Whom we chose to honor? How we treat each other? Or is it a matter of whose rights take precedence? In my view, it is all of these issues.

When an individual is invited to speak at an institution that holds freedom of expression as a core value, and then for whatever reason does not attend, the cause of free speech has inevitably suffered. The protesters on these campuses may object to the institution's honoring of the individual - as opposed to the prospect of hearing their ideas - but the outcome is the same and cannot be readily dismissed.

As for whom we choose to honor, I can only say that at Haverford the decision to honor Robert Birgeneau was vested in a process intended to reflect the values and discernment of the community, overseen by students, faculty, staff, and board members. The decision considered the facts of his career, including all the information protesters later raised in their objections. Indeed, Birgeneau's nomination was reaffirmed by this group after we convened a community meeting in which we listened respectfully and attentively to all voices. At the end of the day, evaluation of personal merit is inherently subjective, worthy of humble reflection and reasoned debate.

But what does a community do when processes undertaken in good faith lead to results with which not all are content? What does seem certain to me is that it is the ethical duty of those with concerns to raise them, with the understanding that the judgment of a minority must be held in balance with the interests of a larger community.

In this sense, the matter of how we as citizens treat each other when we disagree is also at the center of this issue. Mutual respect and the right to protest are decidedly not antithetical ideals. They both are, most assuredly, foundational to a healthy democracy. We must have the courage to speak our consciences and to listen carefully to dissent. We must be willing to be swayed by sound argument and understand that finding common ground is a more noble aspiration than "winning" when working through community conflict. From talk radio to the floors of Congress, it is clear that civil debate and compromise are disappearing arts; one hopes that our campuses can do better in meeting the challenge. Ultimately, we must do better if we are to find ways of addressing what lies ahead for all of us.

Finally, in the midst of such conflicts, whose rights should properly be preserved? The speaker's right to expression? The protesters' right to dissent? The graduates' right to a celebratory occasion? The institution's rights to provide a forum for ideas and bestow honors per its community practices?

All of them.

The freedoms we celebrate are not always comfortably or easily protected, but inevitably no one wins, we are no closer to the truth or civil society, when voices are silenced.

But with these rights come responsibilities: to respect others, to respect the context, and to engage productively in dialogue. These must be core values for a community built around a shared search for truth to advance the common good. Here, too, campuses like ours have work to do in assuring that these rights are protected and in encouraging all to act responsibly.

As we look to the future, we must recognize that commencement is, above all else, a celebration of our values, especially the importance of our freedoms, including free speech - whether from the podium or from dissenters.

We live in a society that can be rude and disrespectful, but we should not be intimidated by threats of disruptive tactics that will surely be exposed for what they are. By protecting freedoms, we place at risk the harmony of our celebration, but, in so doing, we reaffirm the values that matter most.

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