

## **Yale Believes In Free Speech—and So Do I**

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The United States is struggling culturally and politically with questions of race and ethnicity, as it has through its entire history. It should be no surprise that these matters are surfacing on college and university campuses, as they did in the past.

This time around, campus presidents have come under heavy pressure to take sides in a conflict that many have characterized as a war between the principles of inclusion and free expression. One side seems to think that we cannot make communities more inclusive unless we are willing to constrain or discourage the expression of offensive views. As the other side sees it, we cannot sustain an absolute commitment to free expression if we make inclusion an essential aspect of our mission.

This narrative of conflict rests on a false dichotomy, and a dangerous one at that. I believe we can uphold free expression and make our campuses more inclusive places. I also think it is critical that we do so.

At Yale, we adhere to exceptionally strong principles of free expression. These were set forth originally in the [Woodward Report](#) of 1974, which was Yale's signal contribution to earlier debates over free expression, and which has served as a model at many other universities. Yale does not censor invited speakers, nor does the administration discipline faculty members or students for the expression of ideas, no matter how unpopular. The answer to speech one finds offensive is more speech.

We also prize an inclusive community. Last year, when racial matters again became national issues, incidents took place on many campuses that catalyzed student activism. Some of our students were determined to communicate to us their own experiences—at Yale. We took the time to listen to what they had to say. Not only were they telling us some things we needed to hear, but we also knew we should be models of how to engage in difficult conversations without shutting down the people trying to speak.

We responded to student concerns, denying some requests while announcing measures to address others. We had been considering most of these measures for some time, including a previously announced initiative to promote faculty diversity and excellence. Student concerns reinforced and confirmed some of our own judgments about specific steps we could take to make Yale a more inclusive community. I believed that in taking some of these steps, we were unquestionably doing the right thing for our university.

Those who worry that free speech is imperiled at Yale should take note of the facts. In the course of all the events and discussions of the past year, the Yale administration did not criticize, discipline or dismiss a single member of its faculty, staff or student body for expressing an opinion. Nor have we allowed any member of the community to disrupt or otherwise prevent a

scheduled speaker from having his or her say. No invitation to any speaker has been withdrawn as the result of concerns about viewpoint or potential disruption.

A commitment to free speech does not mean that one has to think all speech is equally valuable, respectful or helpful to the educational mission. Last year many campuses, including our own, saw difficult confrontations and moments in which individuals demonstrated poor judgment about where and how to speak.

The promotion of free expression does not mean all speakers will express themselves in wise or civil ways. In a volatile world with social media and cameras on every phone, emotional moments can be taken out of context and magnified, distorting or obscuring an accurate view of events. With rare exceptions, our community conducted itself thoughtfully and respectfully through many weeks of intense discussion.

Far from discouraging free speech, events at Yale last year triggered a rich and remarkable set of conversations and debates across our student organizations, classrooms and open campus forums. The Yale Daily News, the oldest daily student newspaper in the country, filled its pages and opinion columns with voices that diverged in every conceivable way. Faculty have spoken to all aspects of the relevant events and issues, as have alumni and staff. I cannot remember a greater display of free expression since I arrived at Yale as a graduate student in 1981.

Our nation has not come to the end of its challenges with the terrible legacies of slavery and discrimination in all its forms. Inclusion and equality are works in progress, both for Yale and for the rest of our exceptional country. I deeply believe that free expression advances that work, as it always has, the more of it the better.