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Commencement speakers, academic freedom and the liberal arts

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Quad 136

Freedom and the Liberal Arts

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Commencement Speakers, Academic Freedom and the Liberal Arts



It happens every year as commencement season approaches. There is a kerfuffle around **who should be allowed to speak on a college campus**. This year Rutgers University is in the eye of the storm. The administration has invited Condoleezza Rice to speak at commencement and some faculty and students are **demanding that the invitation be rescinded** because of Rice's role as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State in the George W. Bush administration.

The specific criticisms surround Rice's role in the Iraq War, but it is really about political differences. The arguments can be dressed up in other language, but, as is almost always the case with critics of campus speakers, the faculty and students at Rutgers disagree with Rice's politics. Of course politics very often have a moral component, so I don't intend to make light of the importance of political differences, but there is something deeply troubling about attempts to control speech, and ultimately ideas, on a university campus, where ideas are the heart and soul of the institution.

For faculty members to seek to prevent someone from speaking on campus is at the very least ironic and at worst, arguably, professional malpractice, for at least three important reasons.

1. Academic Freedom. The University is built on the notion of academic freedom. Faculty members of all disciplines rightly expect to be able to pursue research into any area (subject to the professional standards of their disciplines) without fear or favor. They would appropriately bridle at the notion that an outsider could limit their intellectual choices in any way. The wide-ranging pursuit of all ideas is what ultimately leads us to a fuller understanding of the truth about humans and the world. This notion has been the bedrock of academic life for centuries. But by limiting speech on campus, which is part and parcel of academic freedom, faculty critics are saying some ideas are not deserving of a hearing in the intellectual arena.
2. Choices. Faculty are free to include whatever content they wish in their syllabi and courses, as they determine how best to educate their students. Again, they would strongly object if the administration or a legislature made attempts to censor what they might ask students to read outside of class or discuss in class. Yet by attempting to exclude certain speakers from campus, faculty are engaging in just such censorship and telling both students and the community that the faculty know what is best for them intellectually.

3. The liberal arts. A central purpose of education in general and the liberal arts in particular is to broaden students: to introduce them to ideas they had not previously experienced, to expose them to difference, to challenge and test their assumptions about the world, to make them uncomfortable. When a faculty member says, in effect, “I do not want to listen to a speaker because I disagree with them,” they are undermining the very purpose of a university. They are giving their students permission to say, “I don’t want to listen to a classmate or a professor or an idea that I disagree with.” Furthermore, they are not preparing their students to live in a world where they will encounter differences of opinion on a nearly daily basis. They are encouraging their students to be insular and narrow—the exact opposite of the broadminded, empathetic, curious citizens a liberal arts education should produce.

While critics of campus speakers often are liberals disagreeing with conservative speakers (e.g. [Robert Zoellnick at his alma mater Swarthmore](#) and [Dr. Ben Carson at Johns Hopkins](#)), attempts to control speech and ideas come from across the political spectrum. A famous recent controversy involved an effort to prevent [President Obama from speaking at Notre Dame](#) because of his support for abortion rights. Similarly, we at Saint John’s University and the College of Saint Benedict are occasionally asked by alumni and others to dis-invite a speaker who has expressed an opinion that is at odds with Catholic teaching (usually abortion), even when the speaker is not talking about the controversial topic.

As a matter of philosophy and policy, universities should welcome anyone to speak on campus.* In an academic community all ideas deserve to be explored and challenged. As should be obvious, having a speaker on campus is absolutely not an endorsement of that individual’s beliefs, but rather an endorsement of academic freedom and the willingness to hear different and sometimes uncomfortable things. But ultimately this openness to ideas is based on a faith in the power of education. Students come to us seeking, in part, truth and meaning, and if we do our job well, they will listen to all ideas carefully and wisely to find truth and meaning for their own lives.

In some ways, the most disappointing part of the Rutgers controversy is the argument the editors of the student paper made in their editorial supporting the call to dis-invite Ms. Rice. They write, “The point is, we just don’t feel comfortable having politicians as commencement speakers at all. A commencement speaker is meant to be someone who has made some extraordinary and meaningful accomplishments in their lives to inspire a generation of college graduates. Rice probably has a lot of advice on perseverance, dedication and hard work that she can offer to this year’s graduating class, but what she chose to do with those qualities is certainly questionable to us.” Would these students object to having President Obama or Hillary Clinton as their commencement speaker? It seems unlikely, rather the students appear to have taken the faculty arguments about not wanting to listen to someone they disagree with and made them their own. For this, the faculty critics and students both should be ashamed.

*Subject of course to resources constraints (not all speakers can or should be paid to speak) and opportunity costs (only a limited number of speakers can fit into a calendar). But these constraints should not be used as excuses to limit the range of important ideas the community is exposed to.

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