



# Encouragingly, Both Sides in Debate on Campus Speech End Up Defending Campus Speech

**At GW last night, nobody was willing to argue that students should be silenced.**

Stephanie Slade

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Anyone feeling disheartened by the [many ways](#) our [First Amendment freedoms](#) are [under attack](#) may find solace in the outcome of an event [last night](#) hosted by Intelligence Squared at George Washington University. Two teams of two debated whether liberals are stifling intellectual diversity on college campuses—and the side arguing *for* the proposition won in a landslide.

Interestingly, three of the four participants and both debaters arguing the affirmative identify as liberals. The winning side was represented by Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), and Kirsten Powers, one of Fox News' sacrificial left-of-center contributors. Both consider themselves to be liberals. Their opponents were a very entertaining (and also very liberal) Angus Johnston, who studies student activism, and the George Mason University professor Jeremy Mayer. Mayer was the only one on stage who seemed reluctant to self-identify as a lefty, though he admitted he holds positions (like being pro-choice) that would lead most people to view him as liberal.

What was interesting was how many times *both* sides found themselves arguing against any and all campus censorship. The "against" side conceded up front that universities are all-too-regularly guilty of shutting down dissent. They thought the people doing the shutting down were usually college administrators, acting out of a desire to avoid "disruptiveness and clamor" rather than an ideologically motivated instinct to silence those who hold views they don't like—but they *agreed* that silencing happens. In the end, the ground between the two sides was smaller than one might have expected going in.

Some of the best quotes of the night from both teams are below the jump, while a video of the full debate [can be viewed here](#). It's worth a gander.

## On Speech Codes

"No, there is no role for speech codes, especially on a campus. We hear a lot about how campuses are now supposed to be these 'safe spaces.' They should be physically safe. But they should be places that

you go and you feel challenged. And you might feel angry, and you might feel upset, and you might read things and hear things that are intellectually diverse, and you might actually encounter people who think differently than you." —**Kirsten Powers**

"[College] should be a place where students are allowed to make mistakes—to say something that is offensive." —**Kirsten Powers**

"I think that speech codes are wrong. ... And I also agree that speech can be painful and should be painful on a college campus. One of FIRE's cases is when conservative students hold an 'affirmative action bake sale,' and they price the goods at different prices so black kids can buy them up at 25 cents, but white kids have to pay \$2. And it's a graphic representation of white resentment of affirmative action. And it really makes some black students very, very angry. But I would, as [someone on the liberal side today], fiercely defend the right of conservative students to do that, even if I would think it violates civility, by inflicting that kind of pain. That's what a college campus must do, is be open to those kinds of debates." —**Jeremy Mayer**

"Meanwhile, at Yale and Harvard and Princeton—the big schools that people would mean when they're talking about higher education—they all promise free speech to high heaven, and they should be held to those promises." —**Greg Lukianoff**

### **On Civility**

"But speech that nobody opposes is not speech that needs protecting. ... And you know, hyperbole is free speech, whether it's the hyperbole of students calling a speaker who said something unfortunate a racist, or the hyperbole of an administrator calling a polite letter a violent attack. Demonizing your opponent is free speech. But so is refusing to demonize them." —**Angus Johnston**

"John Stuart Mill, in his wonderful 1859 book "On Liberty," talks about civility. And this is why you should always be concerned about calls for civility. He points out that civility ends up getting defined by the people who are in charge. And you'll notice that when people argue for civility, they tend to actually believe that whatever they say is civil. And if they're angry about it, it's righteous rage. But if you say it and it's kind of sharp or mean, then it's incivil. ... And sometimes, disagreement—to be productive—can't be all that civil." —**Greg Lukianoff**

"Does she [a participant in another debate] have a right to do it [use the n-word]? Absolutely. But is it right for other people to say, 'Wow, that was really kind of gross'? Yes." —**Angus Johnston**

"People will make mistakes and use the word 'racist' inappropriately. I don't think she [the participant in another debate who used the n-word] was a racist, but I fiercely would protect the right of people to call her racist. That's not censorship. That's free speech." —**Jeremy Mayer**

"Let me put it this way: I think that being called a racist is not the worst thing in the world. It's something that has happened to me. I have been on the receiving end of that, and I dealt with it. Sometimes the people calling me a racist were kind of right and sometimes they were kind of wrong,

and in either situation, I learned something from it. And if somebody thinks that I'm a racist, I would far rather have them tell me that than not." —**Angus Johnston**

"When I was at college, my first month, a gay student group had a kiss-in in the mailroom. And back in '86 that was revolutionary to see men and men and women and women kissing deeply. It really created a discussion. That's free speech. And was it offensive, was it dangerous? Yeah. But that's what a campus should be."—**Jeremy Mayer**

### **On Trigger Warnings**

"No, [trigger warnings] shouldn't be [on campus at all]. It's ridiculous." —**Jeremy Mayer**

"I think I actually am the nation's most prominent faculty supporter of trigger warnings at this point. I use trigger warnings in my classes. I think they are absolutely appropriate. I think they should never be mandatory. But I also think that it is absolutely crucial to create an environment where everybody can participate in a classroom discussion. And part of that is recognizing that we all come into the classroom as whole people who have our own experiences. And so if I am talking about the murder and the desecration of the body of Emmett Till, I would kind of like to know whether one of my students has just lost a son. And if one of my students has just lost a son, I would talk about Emmett Till in a different way than I would under other circumstances. I don't think that my free speech is being violated if I make that choice." —**Angus Johnston**

"To me, [the idea of trigger warnings] doesn't seem like something that's really encouraging a robust sort of intellectual debate. But look, if you want to do trigger warnings, you can do trigger warnings. The problem that has been raised has been with professors who have been told that they *must* provide trigger warnings." —**Kirsten Powers**

"[Trigger warnings] are a liberal idea based on sensitivity. I think they're well-intentioned [but] I think a lot of speech code ideas are well-intentioned." —**Greg Lukianoff**

### **On the Heckler's Veto**

"The Heckler's Veto is a horrible thing, and it shouldn't happen, and frankly, it's pretty rare." —**Angus Johnston**

"When I was an undergraduate student, involved in various student organizations, I remember feeling afraid to talk about certain issues. I remember feeling like if I said the wrong thing, that I might get yelled at, or maybe somebody would even stop liking me. I remember that that scared me. And I remember that what it did sometimes is make me keep my mouth shut—which, as a 19-, 20-, 21-year-old white guy was maybe not the worst thing that could happen to a person.

"But the other thing that it did is it made me think more seriously about what I was going to say. It made me chew on the stuff. And sometimes I did think seriously about what I was going to say, and I still said something that offended somebody else. And they let me know it. And here I am today, still alive,

still doing OK. Part of free speech on campus is people being passionate about the degree to which they abhor what you say.

"I absolutely think that we need more free speech on campus when we're talking about administrators and faculty imposing their own values, whether ideological or not. But I also absolutely think that we need to stand up for the right for people to engage in rowdy, obnoxious debate, because rowdy, obnoxious debate is what made me what I am and it's what made a lot of you what you are." —**Angus Johnston**