

“Using Think-Alouds to Understand How Students Balance Free
Speech and Inclusion”

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Abstract

Higher education is increasingly under fire as a bastion of liberal intolerance, where freedom of expression is routinely curtailed to protect and coddle vulnerable individuals and foster inclusion. While much of this picture is exaggerated, recent evidence suggests there is some truth at the core of this claim. We explore student attitudes toward freedom of speech on campus using a *think-aloud* method, in which students are exposed to source material on a subject and “think aloud” as they work through it. We gain an in-depth picture of how students understand and make judgments about who should and should not be allowed to speak on campus. Students tend to be more restrictive than a civil libertarian might like, albeit in (usually) internally consistent and sympathetic ways. We conclude by suggesting interventions that could help students better understand the way First Amendment rights are typically adjudicated and balanced against other lofty goals.

Higher education is under attack. In an era of declining state support and increasing income inequality, society increasingly questions the high cost of college, and whether students are learning enough (Arum and Roksa 2011; Bok 2006). Today, the broad assumption that attending college and receiving a degree is an unquestioned good no longer holds (Hacker and Dreifus 2010). Setting aside these questions, higher education institutions are frequently accused of being liberal indoctrination mills (Fritschler, Smith, and Mayer 2018; Gross 2013). While the vast majority of those teaching lean to the left, we have little doubt that most college professors adhere to standards of professionalism, encouraging open debate in classes and avoiding indoctrination, or punishment, of students who do not hold the correct views. Yet, particularly in highly-charged political times, we cannot say with confidence that all educators do this (on both sides of the partisan divide); furthermore, social media makes it harder for us to hide our views from our students, even if we wanted to do that.

Intensified by the “political correctness” movement over thirty years ago, the portrayal of higher education as a bastion of left-wing intolerance remains a staple of talk radio and conservative commentary (see Kirk 2018; Mattera 2010; Shapiro and Limbaugh 2010). Much of this argument is made through reference to extreme cases of “thought policing” and harsh consequences for speech that falls outside the left’s acceptable standards. As a rule, we should be reluctant to paint with a broad brush based on outlying cases; however, these cases fit within a new context in which being on the political left, and having a college degree, no longer predicts high levels of political tolerance, nor support for broad free speech rights. While some claims of the right may be exaggerated, their broad theme is supported by extant data.

How can we understand this evolution (or devolution) in attitudes toward political tolerance and free speech among the more educated? We explore how college students think about the freedom of speech, using a method called “think-alouds,” in which students are confronted with source material about freedom of speech in general, and controversial speakers in particular, and are asked to form judgments about when speech should be allowed, and when it should be proscribed. To preview our findings, the students whose views we explore are not left-wing authoritarians, nor are they staunch civil libertarians. They are, instead, novices struggling to balance competing values of tolerance for free speech versus ensuring safe spaces for those they perceive as marginalized. While we may (and do) disagree with some of their judgments, we note that they are approaching these issues in a thoughtful way, but also in a way that could stand some refinement in its approach. We return to this point later.

We begin by highlighting the popular literature and its claims about colleges as repressive, hyper-PC ecosystems, where dissent is stifled. We follow by exploring the academic literature on political tolerance,

which reveals shifting patterns of support for free speech for dissenting voices. We then introduce the think-aloud method and our data. We examine the broad themes from the think-alouds in our exploration, highlighting the discussion with an extended case study of three of our respondents. We conclude with suggestions for how we might teach these topics in a way that addresses the holes in understanding that our paper exposes, while also valuing the perspective the students bring to the table.

Literature Review

From many angles, higher education is lampooned as a bastion of liberal indoctrination. A cursory search across Twitter and Facebook highlights how many people believe that higher education has changed their children, and not for the better. One Twitter user wrote, “Lots of people have anxiety about having children, it's not because of climate though. They fear their kids might get brainwashed by the sick liberal media, go to college and unlearn everything their parents taught them” (AllHearingEar, 2020). Another writes, “All red states should purge their colleges of ultra-liberal, socialist, Godless, professors and quickly. They’re destroying our children.” (Waynecooksys, 2020).” Noted provocateurs Ben Shapiro and David (brother of Rush) Limbaugh (2010) have also weighed in; the title of their book, *Brainwashed: How Universities Indoctrinate America’s Youth*, offers little doubt on where they stand. Similar treatises are advanced by Mattera (2010) and Kirk (2018); this view of what colleges and universities do to young minds has become a staple within right-wing commentary today.

Where do these beliefs come from? Numerous anecdotes, thriving in the telling and re-telling in the echo chambers of modern politics, provide fuel for this fire. For example, in the infamous Oberlin Sushi protest, students claimed that the cafeteria serving sub-par sushi was in fact cultural appropriation and staged a protest in the cafeteria (Moyer 2015). Another example was the hysteria at Yale around Halloween costumes, in which an Associate Master wrote an email suggesting student make costume decisions for themselves, rather than relying on administrators to dictate to them what would or would not be appropriate to wear. The Associate Master, Erika Christakis, and her husband Nicholas, also a professor, were protested heavily (Friedersdorf 2015); Erika Christiakis eventually had to leave her position.

While the punditry took up these cases and ran with them for sensationalist reasons, we note that fringe beliefs about higher education do not exist in a vacuum. Fritschler et al. (2010), Gross (2013), and Shields and Dunn (2016), for example, explore how liberal hegemony in academia can impact faculty and students on a wide scale, creating barriers to free and open discussion. While the extent to which colleges

and universities are liberal hegemons is outside the scope of our work, the question of how these institutions impact, and are impacted by, student attitudes toward free speech is an important topic for us to consider.

It is difficult to know how far to take many of the foregoing examples in the search for a broad description of attitudes toward free expression on college campuses. Examples (on all sides of an issue) tend to become exaggerated with the re-telling; moreover, extreme examples may show that the poles on the tolerance scale may have moved farther apart, but they do not necessarily tell us if the center has moved. We ought to be leery of using isolated examples to show us that our colleges and universities have become intolerant bastions of liberal orthodoxy.

That caution noted, the academic literature does tell us that things are not, in fact, as they were before. The classic early study of political tolerance is Stouffer (1955), which found overall low levels of political tolerance, but also a strong relationship between tolerance and education; Stouffer saw this as a positive harbinger for the future. Stouffer's survey, however, asked about tolerance towards individuals who were communists, atheists, or socialists, giving it a left-wing tilt. Sullivan et al. (1981) and Wilson (1994) note that this could overstate the amount of tolerance on the left and understate the tolerance on the right, which could misstate the extent to which political tolerance has increased over time. Questions about this aspect of Stouffer's study led to debates within the political tolerance literature regarding the extent to which commitment to political tolerance is a principled stance, rather than a situational one (see Gibson 2013 for an examination of measurement issues in the study of political tolerance).

On one side of this debate were those such as Sniderman et al. (1989), who argue for a "maximalist" theory, in which one's beliefs about political tolerance are held irrespective of the groups involved. Bobo and Licari (1989) find a strong, underlying dimension of tolerance that cuts both across the different reference groups they use (atheists, Communists, racists, militarists, or homosexuals) and the type of activity related to freedom of expression (making a public speech, teaching at a college or university, and having a book at the public library). Tolerance is largely driven by levels of education, mediated by cognitive sophistication; ideology matters as well, with those on the left once again being more politically tolerant. This echoes Sniderman and his colleagues, who find that those on the political left are consistently more tolerant than those on the right, as are people who have higher levels of formal education. These increases in tolerance exist regardless of the referent, bolstering the maximalist theory.

Sullivan, Pierson, and Marcus (1982) reject the maximalist notion and instead offer the theory of pluralistic intolerance, which argues that everyone is intolerant to someone else. Some might be intolerant toward communists, others to militarists, and others to atheists. In the same vein, Chanley (1994) shows that

attitudes toward political intolerance do not arise from generalized principles, but rather reflect a situational component regarding the speaker and the extent to which the speaker is perceived as a threat. Chanley introduces this notion of threat through an experimental design, asking how one would feel about a communist speaking either in (1) an elementary school classroom; or (2) in *your niece Elizabeth's* elementary school classroom. These experimental treatments explain much of the variance in attitudes toward free speech. Davis and Silver (2004) also address threat by invoking the fear of terrorists attacks to determine the extent to which Americans are willing to trade off civil liberties and security. Such trade-offs occur both when talking about feeling personally threatened, as well as feeling threatened sociotropically. Hetherington and Suhay (2011) also find that non-authoritarians who feel themselves under threat of terrorism act very much like authoritarians in attitudes toward political tolerance (see also Huddy et al. 2005).

This notion of threat extends beyond the violence of terrorist attacks, as well as across ideological lines. Crawford and Pilanski (2014), for example, show that across a wide range of political issues and modes of political expression, intolerance toward those with whom we disagree is explained by how threatening these groups are; both liberals and conservatives are intolerant toward those with whom they disagree and from whom they feel threatened. Brandt et al.'s (2014) meta-analysis of attitudes toward political tolerance rejects the idea of liberals being more tolerant than conservatives toward those with whom they disagree. They argue that while there is a general tendency of conservatives to be less open to new ideas (a tendency supported by their data), liberals also engage in motivated reasoning to defend anti-free speech attitudes toward those with whom they disagree.

Most relevant to the data we present here are findings about attitudes toward racist speech. Gross and Kinder (1998) show that attitudes toward racist speech encompass a competition between the values of free speech and racial equality. Their findings show that education and political sophistication are both associated with supporting free speech (while also supporting racial equality). African-Americans in their study, perhaps surprisingly, are guided significantly by principles of free expression. Twenty years later, Chong and Levy (2018) show that tolerance on the left for racist speech has decreased. Those on the left remain supportive of the general norm supporting free expression, but, in essence, draw a line at racist speech and other forms of speech. Liberals are more tolerant of racist speech than conservatives, but the drop-off in such tolerance is sharp for college-educated liberals.

Chong and Levy suggest that racist speech may also be a proxy for hate speech in general. Would attitudes around racist speech extend beyond this narrow category into speech directed against women, or other minorities, or even to cherished political principles (such as pro-choice views)? Such attitudes may be

an affront to many people's conceptions of what freedom of expression should mean. They can also be viewed as an expression of other values, including that of promoting equality, or enabling people from historically-oppressed identities to be comfortable and "at home" in the public square, including universities (Cowan et al. 2002; Gross and Kinder 1998). We explore this tension using a think-aloud method, introduced below, which will enable us to see not only how tolerant our respondents are toward different, controversial speakers, but also to see the mechanism by which they arrive at their decisions.

Data and Methods

As our primary data source, we use a think-aloud methodology, also called protocol analysis (Ericsson and Simon 1993; Wineburg 1991). In a think-aloud, students are given source material to read and are asked to "think-aloud" as they work through the material. Think-alouds have been shown to provide more data than would be obtained from asking someone to retrospectively list their thoughts (Blackwell et al. 1985); moreover, think-alouds allow the researcher to understand how thoughts develop chronologically over the course of an exercise (Whitney and Budd 1996). This method has been used to "pull back the curtain" on student cognition in disciplines such as linguistics (Anderson 2016), history (Wineburg 1991; 2001), nursing (Banning 2008; Forsberg 2014), and political science (Bernstein 2010; 2013).

Think-alouds are appropriate for our research for two reasons. First, we seek to understand how students develop comprehensive, overarching attitudes about a topic, in an inductive fashion. We assume that few university students have formed global attitudes about free speech on campus. Few, we believe, could give a strong, off the cuff, answer to the questions of under what circumstances universities could (or should) impose limitations on speech. Such attitudes are most likely formed inductively, through an accretion of knowledge developed from illustrative cases. We care where students end up in their overarching attitudes toward free speech; we are equally interested in the sequential process by which these attitudes develop. As we feed students a series of complicated cases where speech might reasonably be restricted, we look to see how their attitudes move around and (possibly) congeal; the think-aloud method is ideal for watching how this happens.

Second, given our broader teaching goals, we seek to identify "bottlenecks" in student understanding. Díaz et al. (2008) define bottlenecks as "places where significant numbers of students are unable to grasp basic concepts or successfully complete important tasks (p. 1211). Bottlenecks, or "threshold concepts" (Meyer and Land 2003; 2005), present us with challenges and opportunities. If we can identify the places where students get stuck, or the thresholds they must cross in order to achieve deep understanding, then we can

design our instructional practices to address these bottlenecks. Think-alouds afford us the opportunity to see where students may exhibit more tenuous, shallow understandings, and to intervene accordingly.

In this study, eight undergraduate students at Eastern Michigan University engaged in a think-aloud exercise on the subject of free speech on college campuses; the sessions were audio-recorded. The students were recruited from political science, economics, and psychology classes. One student was an international affairs major, and another was a political science minor; the other six had taken either zero or one political science class at the university. The students were paid \$18 for their participation, which took about one hour. The study protocol was approved by the university's Human Subjects Review Committee.

The exercise began with students reading a few short articles giving broad perspectives on free speech on campus (references to the sources used in the think-alouds are in an Appendix at the end of the paper). Following this, students were presented with the cases of Charles Murray (author of *The Bell Curve*) and former Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice, who each had speaking invitations protested due to their allegedly racist views (Murray) and their alleged support for torture and human rights violations (Rice). In the case of Murray, students were presented with a detailed biography, followed by an article about his speech at Virginia Tech University being protested by students. Rice's case was presented with a story about her withdrawing from an invited commencement address at Rutgers, followed by an article quoting former President Barack Obama arguing that she should be permitted to speak, and that the solution to speech with which one disagrees is more speech. Following these readings, students were presented with a whiteboard, with magnets for the two speakers, and asked to place the magnets along a continuum ranging from "Should Not Be Allowed to Speak" to "Should Be Allowed to Speak." The continuum had five delineated points, but students were told they could place the magnet anywhere on the continuum.

Students were then presented with four additional cases – Bill Ayers, Richard Spencer, Louis Farrakhan, and David Horowitz. For each, they read an account of a particular situation where attempts were made to rescind the invitation or cancel the speech, and then read a second article focusing on who the speaker is and why others might object to their speaking. After reading the material on each speaker, they were asked to place the speaker on the continuum, and were also invited to move any of the magnets they had previously placed. Following the last speaker, they were asked a final question about free speech issues and university classes: "If you were advising the university president on creating a policy regarding controversial campus speakers, what factors would enter into your policy?" After offering their answers, the exercise was completed.

The proctor of the think-aloud (one of the two authors) kept a low profile during the exercises, limited to asking students “What are you thinking?”, or some variant of this question, if they were silent for too long (usually 10-15 seconds). The proctor would also introduce the magnets and remind students that they could move them for previous speakers as the exercise continued. The proctor generally refused to answer substantive questions in any of the exercises, in order to remove their explanations as a source of bias; proctors would, however, define words in neutral terms if the participant was unaware of the meaning of a particular word in one of the articles. For the final question seeking advice for the university president on controversial speakers, the proctor would push the students for clarification, and would gently probe at perceived inconsistencies and contradictions in student placement of speakers.

Results

We begin the presentation of our results with three exemplar cases. These students, we argue, represent three points on a loose continuum of attitudes. Our first case, Will (all student names are pseudonyms), represents what some might say is the prototypical caricature of the modern student; he is quick to shut down expression of those with whom he disagrees. The second case, Melissa, offers a more libertarian approach to free expression. However, we would argue that Will’s case is not quite as simple as it seems; he is thinking about aspects of the issue that Melissa does not contend with, and does so (within his parameters) in a sophisticated manner. While Melissa’s approach may please civil libertarians, in some ways her arguments lack some of the nuance that Will’s have. Our third case student, Julie, blends the two approaches in a sophisticated manner. Her technique seems to be the modal one for our students, although she is perhaps the most nuanced and thoughtful among those who inhabit the center of the continuum.

Case Study #1: Will

As a first case study, we highlight the case of Will. Will represents the traditional, media-emphasized view of the student who is all too willing to limit the free speech rights of campus speakers. While Will does so for virtuous reasons, these reasons are sometimes logically inconsistent and reflect roadblocks ahead of his understanding of First Amendment jurisprudence. As Will does represent the clearest authoritative thinking on why free speech should be curtailed, we have selected quotes below that highlight his reasoning.

First, will addresses his personal philosophy on protection of marginalized groups on campus, which was one of the highest placed virtues that Will demonstrated during the exercise. He often placed protection

and safety of others at the forefront of his decision making. Will, while reading the piece on the “heckler’s veto” and *Feiner v. New York*, states:

I am, I’m kind of on the side of the police here arresting *Feiner*... Because they’re not arresting him because of his use of free speech. He’s being discriminatory and hostile, verbally in public at people. I agree with the incitement of the breach of the peace. Also makes a lot more sense logically to arrest the one person rather than try to contain the crowd around him. It is going to keep more people safe.

From the initial piece of the exercise, Will demonstrated that the protection of the crowd was the key piece to his understanding of the *Feiner* case, rather than *Feiner*’s right to speak in public on a public issue (opposing racism). This set the tone for the rest of the exercise. Will then considered the case of Charles Murray visiting Virginia Tech:

So I guess that raises the question more of is inviting somebody onto campus to speak, giving them a platform? And in giving them a platform is that the institution’s acceptance of this person? Because I would say that if you're inviting somebody to speak onto your campus, that is saying that this person is an academic and is of upstanding character to come and speak to those that this institution is educating. I would agree that giving a platform is endorsing this person. So I would understand why the students at Virginia Tech had asked to rescind the invitation.

Will clearly believes that giving a platform to a controversial speaker is tacitly endorsing what the speaker has to say. As such, he is supportive of students who wish to prevent controversial speakers from coming to campus. Will also addressed the notion of a speaker’s past (i.e., Murray’s controversial and possibly racist book) being the limiting factor to their inclusion on campus. While he does not articulate which way he believes, simply acknowledging it gives some glimpse into the thought process which he is using to make these determinations.

Will’s discussion of Murray and the resulting platform that would be given to him became a recurring theme throughout his think-aloud. Will brought the topic back up when examining the case of Richard Spencer’s planned (uninvited) appearance at Texas A&M. Will addressed the concern surrounding Spencer saying that:

I know who Richard Spencer is. That's gonna be a strong no, absolutely not. Nope, no, no. He is very specifically violent towards racial groups, he's a literal Nazi, no. That should not be allowed on campus. He has plenty of platforms. If I were in charge, I would not be giving him another one...

Will's exercise was heavy with discussions of safety, protection, and platforming. His views on a given speaker were more influenced by these three considerations than by the abstract and practical jurisprudence that has been the historical pattern of free speech rights for years.

Will continued to discuss the nature in which controversial speakers should be prevented from coming to a public university campus by utilizing a combination of his safety argument with an economic argument. In his reading of the David Horowitz case, will claims:

Oh, OK, I thought this was the student government at first but it was the College Republicans request of student government to give them money to let this person speak. A student is saying that their safety is threatened. [A quote in the article says] [i]t is illegal to deny someone the right to free speech simply because of the content. Eh, I don't think I agree with that. I don't know if it is true. I don't think it should be.

Will continues:

This is an institution that can say yes or no to speakers and they do say yes and no. It is not an open mic. This is dedicating resources. This is an interesting thing if we should allow open dialogue. That is what one of these students, Barry, is saying... But if it's somebody who is explicitly violent in the things that they say against these marginalized groups on your campus, then I would not feel safe going there and expressing my ideas... I would be very afraid of physical violence. It's so interesting they have to fund the security.

In this case, Will seems to be willing to deny a speaker's right to speak on campus because of the combination of safety concerns and resource expenditure for the use of paid security. The vested interest of the university in how their resources are spent gives Will the justification to say that the security concerns are grounds for preventing Horowitz from giving his talk.

Will paints a stereotypical yet complex picture of the modern university student. On the one hand, he is all too willing to neglect the legal requirement that free speech laws must be content neutral. Will operates more from a belief that safety comes first. Will may not offer a satisfactory answer for a constitutional law class, but he does offer compelling, and we might suggest virtuous, reasons for limiting speech. His consideration of student safety, for example, is sympathetic behavior, as is his concern for the reputation of the university that must host the speech and potentially be perceived as supporting it. Will is quick to understand that speech can do harm, and also quick (perhaps too quick) to limit it. Overall, while Will does fit the mold of the traditional media representation of an intolerant college student, there is far more below the surface than is typically considered.

Case Study #2: Melissa

Our second case study was conducted with Melissa. We would place Melissa on the other side of the spectrum from Will. Melissa demonstrates the libertarian tendency to allow all forms of speech in order to further public discourse and understanding. She generally remained logically consistent throughout her entire think-aloud exercise and affords the same level of First Amendment protections to all but one speaker, even those with whom she vehemently expressed disgust. In some ways, however, she misses some of the nuance that Will brings to the task.

Melissa addresses the “heckler’s veto” by disagreeing with Will in response to the police arresting Feiner:

[T]he police should not have arrested Feiner because the crowd was being hostile and he has the right of speech, they [the crowd] have the freedom of speech too but that doesn't mean they have the right to push people.

Melissa seems to suggest here that the crowd is responsible for their actions and that Feiner is not responsible for the outpouring of violence. She continues:

The US Supreme Court, in my opinion, should not have upheld that conviction because his [Feiner’s] freedom of speech was being violated. I think it's weird that the police officers got Feiner in trouble when the crowd was the one who's actually been violent.

Melissa demonstrates this commitment to personal responsibility and freedom throughout the duration of her exercise. She contended with the legal requirements of the First Amendment much more substantially than Will did. Melissa, without addressing it directly, does acknowledge that the First Amendment and the rights provided must be content neutral. An example of this would be when Melissa said:

I guess as long as you’re not using your words to encourage someone to take action in a violent way you should be allowed to say what you want and if people don’t like it then that’s fine, they don’t have to like it...

Melissa’s previous quote highlights what many students in our exercise missed in their analysis of the First Amendment. While most were happy to prevent Richard Spencer from coming onto their campus, Melissa

afforded him the same protections that she would have to someone like Condoleezza Rice. Melissa sums this up by discussing Richard Spencer and stating:

This is hard because I don't agree with his ideas at all but I don't want to be, I don't want to be biased and tell him that or think that he can't speak just because I don't agree with his ideas. His ideas are so out there but does that mean he should not be allowed to speak? Well I mean the other people I said that they should be allowed to speak even if they have controversial ideas. So if I'm going to be intellectually honest and fair I would have to say that he should be allowed to speak too.

In this previous example, Melissa demonstrates the most civil-libertarian line of thinking that we found during our eight think-aloud sessions. While personally opposing the speech of Richard Spencer, she does afford him his First Amendment rights to free speech. Unlike Will, who stated that he would not allow Spencer anywhere near campus, Melissa scored Spencer a 5 on our matrix, the line entitled “should be allowed to speak.” Every single controversial campus speaker was scored a 5 by Melissa, save for Bill Ayers. She claimed Ayers was not a 5 because she was unsure of what his speaking topic was and the fact that he had previously committed bombings for which he was unapologetic.

While Melissa does address the content neutrality portion of the First Amendment, she does not examine the angle of safety in nearly as much detail. The only instance where she addresses safety is towards the end of her exercise when she claims:

I think that they (universities) should be really clear and I think that their policy should be if they are encouraging people to actually take action in a violent way, then they should not be allowed to speak.

Melissa seems to unwittingly uphold First Amendment jurisprudence by agreeing that speech can only be curtailed if imminent lawless action is advocated. Her interpretation is not necessarily as clear as the Supreme Court's and therefore we could be underestimating the extent to which she would restrict First Amendment rights. However, we believe that with Melissa's logical consistency throughout the exercise, she would abide by the judicial reasoning of imminent lawless action rather than simple calls to violent action.

Finally, Melissa reaches the issue of platforming. What is interesting to note here is that she arrives in opposition to Will. Whereas Will believed that a university allowing a controversial speaker access to campus was providing them a platform and tacitly endorsing their speech, Melissa did not. This could be the strongest difference between students who support limiting controversial speakers and those who do not. Melissa articulates this argument when she says:

So like this is really hard because I haven't had much time to think about this but I would say the University should make a statement that just because they are letting people speak does not mean that they agree with them or support their ideas. That should be made really clear.

Melissa and Will represent two sides of a continuum, weighing the competing values of freedom of expression and protection of marginalized groups (safety) in different proportions. Moreover, while Will believes that platforming is a responsibility of the university to understand and take into account, including consideration of how offering such a platform might affect the campus community, Melissa argues that the university is not responsible for the content of the speakers that they allow on campus. These are both important differences, although, as our third case student makes clear, they need not be dichotomies.

Case Study #3: Julie

As a third case study, we present Julie. To the extent we can talk about the “average” respondent in a small sample of qualitative data, we suspect her views might be the average of all our respondents (although she does approach the task with more sophistication than the others, likely a result of her being an international affairs major, as well as a senior). Her responses, we would argue, reflect a largely internally-consistent balancing of competing goals.

Julie begins by addressing the “heckler’s veto” that was discussed in the first of the readings. Like most participants (but not Will), Julie begins by supporting free speech rights in the case of a heckler’s veto:

So when it says in other words the speaker’s right to free speech is compromised by the fear of disruption – fundamentally we do have the right to speech so I guess being a political science student and I’m always taught to be respectful so it’s kind of a shame when people can’t actually speak when there is things like that happening.

Soon, however, when approaching the question of how universities should deal with controversial speakers, we see the position being tempered. There is an attempt in the following paragraph to support speakers with “distasteful” viewpoints, but her support for this position weakens as she progresses in her reasoning:

Um, so this is how universities should uphold the principle that even speakers with distasteful viewpoints should be heard and only in rare instances enact the heckler’s veto. Unless it’s like extremely hurtful or bad I think hearing different viewpoints is always a good thing. If it obviously gets distasteful then I understand why they would implement the heckler’s veto, but it’s just a different point of view. I don’t see the reason why they couldn’t do that.

Julie seems to support the idea of allowing speech that is “distasteful” at the beginning of the quote, but by the end, she has backed off of this position. Her use of “heckler’s veto” to discuss a university shutting down speech is not the correct term, but the broad idea of shutting down speech comes through even if the right term is not used.

As the think-aloud proceeds, Julie is somewhat supportive of allowing Bill Ayers to speak, at least on content grounds. She does hesitate, given Ayers’ past, offering a caveat that speech that is “radical” or supports bombings might be too much:

If he is a Marxist and that’s just his viewpoint on Communism ... even though I don’t agree with it that’s something that probably should still be allowed to be heard as long as it’s not, I guess, radical and promoting bombings and stuff like that.

These views echo her earlier comments of approval for Barack Obama’s defense of Condoleeza Rice’s right to speak, suggesting that the best approach to speech with which we disagree is to bring the speakers in, and push and question the speaker.

[Y]ou shouldn’t always agree with everything everybody does politically, however, you should still listen and if anything just gain a new viewpoint or further add that to why you don’t believe in it. I think that’s coming from Obama who disagreed with some of the foreign policy that I think that showed a lot of character that he still said that we should act in respect. He said I don’t think that’s how democracy works best when we’re not even willing to listen to each other. I agree.

The earlier speakers presented challenging cases for her, but Julie generally ended up on the pro-free speech side when considering Charles Murray, Condoleeza Rice, and Bill Ayers (to a somewhat lesser extent, given his history of violence), even in cases where she disagreed with their views.

As the think-aloud proceeded, Julie found many comments of Richard Spencer, Louis Farrakhan, and David Horowitz to be distasteful, suggesting in the end that she would not want them to be allowed to speak. For example, toward the end of the think-aloud, she compared Farrakhan and Horowitz:

So I think these two characters obviously are very opposites, polar opposites, I mean it’s hard to say like you shouldn’t be allowed to speak because we do you have that right for freedom of speech. If they’re both promoting very hateful things like saying we should cause violence for these people I would definitely say no, but maybe like if you were to [moderate it] so that way it doesn’t get hateful, I feel like it’s hard to not let it get hateful. I just have a very hard time saying that somebody shouldn’t [be allowed to speak].

Julie's views are summed up well by a dialogue with the proctor at the end of the think-aloud, wherein she expresses support for the free-speech rights of controversial speakers, albeit in a way that limits what aspects of controversial speech are protected:

- Julie: I think students should have the right to hear both sides of the story even if they are controversial. If they are inciting hate crimes and things like that I would say no though just because that's not a democratic thing and we are a democratic country. But I am, I guess as long as it's not like violent or like hateful or racist or things like that, I would say OK.
- Q: So violence crosses a line?
- Julie: Yeah.
- Q: Does racist cross that same line?
- Julie: Yeah.
- Q: Hate? Hate-based?
- Julie: Yeah, if it's fueled by hate and like trying to promote just intolerance of others, I think we should be respectful, even if someone has different viewpoints.

Summarizing this think-aloud, we see genuine (and probably appropriate) struggle between the principle of allowing free speech, but also trying to protect a university community from speech that will hurt and marginalize members of that community. While Julie is not willing to support free speech even in the face of significant discomfort and offense to others like Melissa is, she is also not willing to blithely toss aside the First Amendment to protect those who are marginalized in the community. Her views, as we noted above, represent the most common approach to free speech and political tolerance that we observed in this exercise.

Summarizing the Lessons

Throughout the eight think-alouds that we conducted, we learned three important ideas from our participants. These ideas – platforming, safety, and content neutrality – represent threshold concepts students must contend with when considering allowing or restricting controversial campus speakers. Understanding how each of these ideas plays out in the real world will help us better inform our students on how to negotiate the gaps between students' concerns, universities' obligations, and First Amendment jurisprudence. We will briefly discuss each of these ideas below, illustrated with selected quotes from other think-aloud sessions which will help to inform our conclusions.

The first major theme was that of on-campus safety. In our final question, we asked students to propose a policy that a university president could use as their touchstone when deciding who to allow to speak

on campus. Six out of our eight participants used safety as their guideline for the final question. The two quotes below highlight the cases in which our participants discussed safety. First, Anita describes the comfort that would come from preventing racially divisive speakers from coming to campus:

I think one of the main factors would definitely be safety, not only for the controversial speaker but also for the, uh, student population because if you do have a controversial speaker regarding like racial or ethnic issues, those students may not feel safe and we want them to feel safe on campus.

On the other hand, consider Christina's comments, which seemed to focus on physical safety:

I guess it is just safety for both sides but it's more safety for the speaker and if I don't agree with that speaker or want them to attend, I still wouldn't want to fund security for him or her.

Christina and Anita's comments outline the growing student concern around safety. While both physical and emotional safety were outlined by our research participants, universities should be primarily concerned with physical safety. Physical harm at an event is more easily controlled than self-perceived emotional harm. With this in mind, a university does have a clearly vested interest in ensuring that the speaker who is coming to campus will not bring violence with them. This does not, of course, suggest that universities, or their students, faculty, and staff, should turn a blind eye to any emotional turmoil caused by a controversial speaker. The remedy often utilized for protecting students' emotional well-being is that of cancelling the event, although we believe that this should very seldom be the case.

Platforming was the second contentious issue discussed during our think-aloud sessions. In five of our eight think-aloud sessions, the term platform or endorse came up at least once. Participants were overwhelmingly concerned that their university would be held responsible for giving a platform to or seeming to endorse what an invited speaker was saying. Outside of Will and Melissa, this idea is best summed up by another participant, Abby. Abby stated in regards to the Charles Murray invitation:

That's not a conversation I feel is necessary to engage in because I feel like it just comes from a place of ignorance and I don't think there's any reason for a school to endorse that because then I do think it opens up people to be like, "oh, well if he thinks that, I can think that," and then it just spirals.

Abby's concern is that bringing a speaker to campus with nefarious or dangerous rhetoric will influence others to think like they do. She believes that it can spiral into negative outcomes, which is not something that our participants wanted, especially in light of recent politically motivated violence. While by legal standards, universities are not responsible for the content of any given speaker, this discussion is different in the minds of university students than it is in constitutional jurisprudence. While we are sympathetic to the concerns of

students, we also suspect that more clear guidelines and education on the implications of platforming would help students better understand how these concerns fit within First Amendment law and practice.

Finally, content neutrality was the last recurrent theme. Four of our eight think-alouds expressly discussed content neutrality and two others made allusions to it. Melissa was the best example of someone who wants decisions to be made in a content neutral way. Another participant, Brody, also expressed favor for content neutral decisions. Brody simply said that “[G]overnment’s not permitted to censor free-speech based upon its content.” Brody and Melissa both noted that universities, as public entities, must abide by First Amendment jurisprudence just as the government does. While this is a valid understanding of the issue, other students see it differently. The most eloquent example of this was from Abby, who stated:

I think content has messages and content has an impact and I think content should be taken seriously because content is what drives communication, conversation, actions. It drives everything, so I don’t know why it’s not taken seriously. So I think if someone has messages that include content of, “we hate Muslims” that’s an important message that I think should be taken seriously and is going to lead to certain thoughts or actions and it’s going to connect the community and future students. As someone who’s also concerned about future enrollment as a president, I wouldn’t want people to feel unsafe coming to the university.

Abby makes an articulate case against content neutrality from a university perspective. While all three of the key issues are something for universities and their faculty to ponder and discuss, we see content neutrality as the issue in which education would be best applied to better student understanding. While students roundly understood content neutrality, many did not understand its legal requirements. We believe this is an opportunity to educate our students on what the First Amendment requires, how it impacts universities and impacts society, and how universities must tread lightly on the ground between freedom and vested interest.

Conclusion, Implications, and Future Research

Our work here is, of course, limited by the low-N problem typical of think-alouds. We have, however, been able to address the inductive development of student thinking on this issue. While some students take relatively libertarian positions on free speech, supporting the right to speak for speakers with almost no regard for the content of their speech, others have willingly imposed content restrictions on speech, in the name of safety and out of concerns about the impact of platforming. Most students, we would argue, find themselves walking along the continuum of tolerance, struggling to apply theoretical notions of free speech to an empirical reality where limiting speech sometimes feels more virtuous.

In writing this paper, we have studiously attempted to avoid value judgments in assessing how our respondents addressed the limitations, or lack of same, that they would put on free speech. We have viewed them, as Gross and Kinder (1989), Peffley, Knigge, and Hurwitz (2001), Cowan et al. (2002), and others do, as a clash between important values, such as between free speech and racial equality, or equal protection. Readers might have qualms about how our respondents viewed these issues; in many cases, we share these concerns. As an overall finding, we think our respondents often erred on the side of being too quick to restrict speech, even if done for the kindest and most virtuous of reasons.

With this said, if First Amendment protections on speech are to mean anything, they must be read to protect speech even when that speech is offensive, even when that speech might make people feel uncomfortable, and even when we might find virtue in restricting such speech. This is not, of course, an absolute condition, as even the staunchest civil libertarians among us might find legitimate reasons to act in a restrictive manner. Still, having learned as much as we have about how students form their attitudes on free expression and political tolerance, we believe there is much we could do to help students gain a richer understanding of the First Amendment, in order to facilitate more informed decision-making.

We suggest three different lessons students could be taught about the First Amendment in order to help them become informed scholars. First, students would do well to understand the difference between a university *hosting* a speech and a university *supporting* a speech. Much objection to allowing speech on campus was predicated on the idea that the university did not want to endorse a particular value; it is worth a reminder that just because a speech takes place on a campus does not, and should not, implicate the university in the content of said speech.

Second, we believe most students need a deeper understanding of the high barriers in place when attempting to limit speech based upon content. All too often, we wonder if the decisions made about banning speech is based on whether the speech makes people feel uncomfortable, or, somewhat vaguely, unsafe. Courts have not permitted limitations on speech because it is upsetting – court cases granting the Nazis the right to march in Skokie, or the Westboro Baptist Church to protest near military funerals, demonstrate that even hateful and unenlightened political speech gets significant protection. There is, perhaps uncomfortably, a constitutional difference between being physically unsafe and feeling emotionally uncomfortable. We note, as well, a connection between this point and the point addressed in the previous paragraph. Knowing that a university's hosting an allegedly racist speaker does not convey endorsement of such speech might help students to feel less like the school is a hostile environment to them. Of course, it might not provide any reassurance whatsoever.

Finally, we note that these are hard decisions; this fact needs to be front and center in our drive to help students gain a deeper understanding of the First Amendment. We must help students realize that these issues are not only complicated, but that deep thought and discussion about this and similar issues is the heart of what being an educated person entails. It is important to resist the easy answers that call for limiting speech, but also be aware of other values (such as equality and justice) that might be challenged by unrestricted speech. Helping our students to understand controversies in an environment that truly values open debate, discussion, and disagreement may be one of the most important things a college education can do for them.

In future work, we intend to repeat these think-alouds, but supplement them with material highlighting the three lessons noted above. Doing so, we hope, can enable students to work through the nuances of the First Amendment with a better sense of how to approach the law around these issues, and how to weigh the competing interests at stake in each of these decisions. Our hope is that emphasizing these lessons can help them to perform this task in a more sophisticated manner, however they ultimately decide; our firm belief is that time spent learning to do so will be time well spent in their study of government and politics.

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Appendix

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