Free Expression and Campus Life

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I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak to you today on the topic of free expression and campus life, within this afternoon's broader thematic context of speech and privilege. I believe the interaction of free expression and privilege is an extremely important one, and highly relevant to what is taking place on many university campuses.

I will organize my discussion into three parts. First, I want to discuss free expression and education—why free expression is a necessary and intrinsic part of the most empowering and enriching education. Second, I want to offer some general comments on free speech and privilege. Third, I want to connect these two areas and discuss free speech and privilege on campus and how it relates to education. In this context, I will discuss a common but seriously misguided approach that one sees around the country.

The missions of universities can be summarized simply: to provide outstanding, empowering, and enriching education for students that will serve them well their entire lives; to foster research that will increase understanding—individual, cultural, social, scientific, and technical—that renews and expands our views of our multiple histories and builds technical capacity for improving human life; and, through the work of its faculty and students-turned-alumni, to have an impact on the world. The key to excellence in each of these areas is a culture of questioning and challenge. The confrontation of new and different ideas, understanding the power and limitations of an argument, comfort with questioning others and oneself, recognition of one's own assumptions as well as those of others, perceiving the power of context, understanding the inevitability of complexity and the need in many cases to leave behind the temptation of simplicity, exposure and grappling with unfamiliar modes of inquiry, synthesizing different perspectives, and being able to articulately advocate a position—all these are skills that students should acquire through their education, that faculty need to impart in delivering that education,

and that faculty and students need for developing original research. This only happens at the highest level in an environment of rigor, questioning, and free and open discourse. Such an environment is not uniformly comfortable for the participants. It is not designed to be comfortable—in fact, to be effective, this environment of challenging one's assumptions inevitably creates discomfort—but a discomfort that is necessary for growth, understanding, and achievement. Thus, it is because of the very mission of universities that free expression and open discourse are intrinsic to their excellence.

Of course, one can always decide to be less than excellent—by choosing domains in which one suppresses speech, allowing a segment of the university community to suppress speech they don't approve of, or allowing outside forces to chill discourse. But this is a fraught and ultimately destructive road to travel, one that creates endless demands for suppression by one group or another and leads to the erosion of quality. At the Chicago Humanities Festival, it is an appropriate moment to recall Saul Bellow's words on this subject expressed through Augie March, in the very first page of his novel recounting Augie's adventures: "Everybody knows there is no fineness or accuracy of suppression; if you hold down one thing you hold down the adjoining."

It is the obligation of all of us who aspire to true excellence in education and research to forcefully and unequivocally defend an environment of free expression on campuses.

Now let me turn to my second topic, namely some general observations on free expression and privilege.

There is no question that every society, including ours, has a history of exclusionary behavior. Our own past is rife with slavery, racism, homophobia, misogyny, anti-Semitism, and more. The resulting exclusionary behaviors have had impacts ranging from the horribly destructive to extreme limiting of opportunities. While we have made great progress, we have much more to do. As a society, we live with the resonance of these histories, many of which continue in one form or another today. We even see new forms of exclusionary behavior emerge, and old forms re-emerge. Such exclusionary behavior is inevitably a means of protecting a perspective, a world-view, set of beliefs, or privilege of a majority. It is in fact reflective of one of the great concerns about democracy itself. Simply having a structure of voting, even when it is voting for

all, is totally inadequate. As many observers have noted, and as even recent history has demonstrated, the tyranny of the majority can be as bad as any other tyranny, and a necessary attribute (although certainly not the only attribute) for a functioning democracy is the protection of minorities.

Free speech gives voice to minorities or those with unpopular perspectives. While protecting free speech is no guarantee of progress against exclusionary behavior and exclusionary privilege, it is an indispensable tool in addressing this problem, as we have seen time and again in this country and beyond. In our own country, it is difficult to imagine that the transformational progress catalyzed by the civil rights movement, women's movement, and gay rights movement would have occurred without the protection of free speech. Similarly, the evolving nature of the economic systems of our nation since its inception have been dependent on the freedom to express unpopular perspectives, and this will surely continue to be the case.

I have given two arguments about free expression, one about it being intrinsic to the nature of an excellent university education, and a very familiar one about protection of minorities and unpopular perspectives. So what exactly seems to be the cause of so much active resistance to free expression on campuses today?

Some of this resistance to free expression is just the usual difficulty, namely that people don't really like it. Many people simply want to silence those with a fundamentally different perspective, particularly when they find the views offensive. They offer justifications from the moral to the political. But not surprisingly, no one gives an argument for suppression of speech of those with whom they agree. It is always those with a different perspective they insist must be silenced. The pressure for suppression may come from outside or from within the university. The sources of the pressure against free expression can ebb and flow. But because of the underlying difficulty people have with free expression, it is always an issue that universities need to address.

There are however other issues around suppression of speech on campuses that have very specific reference to exclusionary privilege and campus life. Let me mention two such arguments that have been used to justify the suppression of speech.

Both arguments start by recognizing the history of exclusionary privilege, which I have already mentioned. Universities, on the other hand, should strive to be inclusive—a view I strongly embrace for many reasons—but like the rest of society, universities have not always been so. The experience of being in an excluded group can be emotionally trying and make dealing with certain issues and ideas more difficult. So far, so good—and one can appreciate and share the empathy that underlies this start. The pro-suppression argument now diverges into two paths.

The first argument asserts that to overcome the history of exclusion and the difficult feelings associated with it, being inclusive demands suppressing speech that may be upsetting to some because of these feelings. The argument is essentially that unequal backgrounds demand that universities respond by being a counterbalance and have unequal protection of speech. It is only in this way, the argument goes, that one can be truly inclusive.

While I appreciate the empathy that underlies this argument, the argument itself is profoundly misguided. One might begin by asking about inclusion into what? An inferior and less challenging education? One that fails to prepare students for the challenge of different ideas and the evaluation of their own assumptions? A world in which their feelings take precedence over other matters that need to be confronted? I do not believe that this inferior educational environment is what we should be offering. In fact, by failing to provide the challenge of open discourse, we shortchange students from groups that have had to deal with exclusion, just as we shortchange those who might not. We owe it to every one of our students to provide the best education we can—it is our responsibility as educators. An excellent education, not a restricted one, is what we need to include all students in. And this excellent education, as I described at the beginning of my remarks, demands an environment of free expression. Our first job with respect to inclusion is to give everyone the ability to have an outstanding education, driven by challenge and free expression.

And what of the difficulty in feelings of those who have had to deal personally with exclusion? These are real and should be attended to. Participating in and benefiting from a challenging environment of open discourse is neither easy nor natural. Learning these skills, individually and collectively, is part of every student's education, and there are many ways in which we need to help all our students. Establishing a civil society on campus is an important goal and adds to the

ability of all to participate. This too is not simple. But it cannot be our aspiration to deal with these legitimate goals by creating an environment of suppression of speech and ideas and in the process reducing the quality of our education.

As I have already indicated, I both recognize and appreciate the empathy that goes into the position of those who make this particular pro-suppression argument. But well-meaning as it might be, I believe it is deeply misguided and in the long run harms, rather than aids, those it is intended to help, and in the process reduces the quality of everyone's education.

That is the first current argument for suppression, well-meaning but deeply problematic. The second argument starts from the same point but focuses on a political agenda rather than concern for the individual. Namely, the second argument is driven by a belief in the importance of a political struggle. Convinced their political and moral position is superior, the correct route ahead clear and simple, and their cause urgent, groups may justify arrogating the right of speech to themselves and those who share their views, while denying it to others. I have little sympathy for this second argument. There has been a long line of similar groups over the years, and a long line of suppressors, who are convinced of their own righteousness and the diabolical nature of those who question. It is a standard if extreme reflection of the phenomenon I alluded to earlier—many people don't like free expression because they only want to hear, and want others to hear, those who share their views. For reasons I have discussed, this is particularly problematic in a university.

Both of these arguments for suppression—one based on misguided conclusions about empathy, one based on a familiar arrogation of speech rights for political reasons—lead to the same place: a diminished education for all, and a failure to live up to our responsibilities as educators.

I am often asked how serious has the impact of these and related arguments in favor of suppression of speech been on campuses around the country. Is the concern much ado about nothing, or is it truly problematic? We all know nothing is perfect and every model or value will have its difficulties in being implemented. Are we just looking at inevitable difficulties somewhat at the margin or is something seriously wrong? In fact, the problem is more profound than even the publicly visible and all too common symptom of speakers being disinvited suggests. In truth, at many institutions today, many students and faculty do not feel free about

expressing unpopular views, because of concerns that such expression will not be institutionally supported as legitimate. This environment has either been overtly allowed or subtly encouraged by those who translate the difficulty of exclusion, which as I have said is a real and sometimes painful difficulty, into the suppression of speech.

In the end, whether the arguments are based on a well-meaning empathy or a standard self-righteous attempt at suppression, universities that aspire to excellence must embrace and defend free expression as a value that is necessary to fulfilling their mission. Only in this way will they be fulfilling their obligations to all their students in preparing them well and empowering them for the challenges and opportunities of their future life.