

HIGHER EDUCATION IS IN DIRE STRAITS; JESUIT-RUN SCHOOLS INCLUDED

This is the article that appeared in the September 2023 edition of Catalyst, our monthly journal. The date that prints out reflects the day that it was uploaded to our website. For a more accurate date of when the article was first published, check out the news release, [here](#).

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As college students head back to school, parents should know more about what they are paying for, including Catholic colleges and universities.

The public appears to be souring on higher education. The level of confidence that Americans have for colleges and universities today is at its lowest level, as determined by Gallup. It is also true that confidence in 16 other institutions has been waning. But the big drop is scored by higher education.

In 2015, Americans' confidence in higher education was 57 percent; in 2018, it dropped to 48 percent; in 2023, it is at 36 percent. Why this is so varies by political party.

Among Democrats, previous Gallup polls found that concern over exorbitant costs was the big factor. For Republicans, the big concern is over the rampant politicization of education. But since the biggest decline in confidence for higher education, as recorded by Gallup, was among Republicans—it dropped by 20 points to 19 percent—it would have made more sense to conclude that politics, not rising costs, “likely play a significant role.”

Democrats are more likely to support student loan forgiveness than Republicans, so of course rising costs figure prominently

for them. What needs to be addressed is why the issue of the politics, raised by Republicans, played a more prominent role in driving down the overall public confidence in higher education. There are several factors at work.

In the last several years, the decline in free speech on the campuses has worsened. Critical race theory—the lie that all white people are inherently racist and that all existing racial disparities are due solely to racism—has been institutionalized. Gender ideology—the lie that the sexes are interchangeable and that there are dozens of genders—is now almost universally acknowledged.

These three factors alone—censoring speech, critical race theory and gender ideology—will continue to drive down public confidence in higher education unless college administrators buck up. But that is not likely given the fact that administrators tend to be even more left-wing than the faculty.

The left-wing faculty are doing much more harm than this.

Survey data reveal that the most intolerant people in America are unquestionably young liberals. Why this is so needs to be probed, but first the data.

The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) studies free speech on college campuses, and its 2022-2023 “College Free Speech Rankings” is particularly insightful. In a survey of almost 45,000 college students from 201 schools, the University of Chicago was rated the top spot; Columbia University was rated the least respectful of free speech of any institution of higher education in the country.

Overall, the degree to which free speech is prized on campus was among its most alarming findings. Liberals, not conservatives, are the problem.

Opposition to allowing controversial conservative speakers on

campus ranged from 59 percent to 73 percent, depending on the speaker. However, opposition to controversial liberal speakers on campus ranged from 24 percent to 41 percent, depending on the speaker.

Is it acceptable to shout down a speaker? For liberals it is: 76 percent approve. For conservatives, the figure is 44 percent.

Is it acceptable to block entry to a campus speech? Almost half of liberals (47 percent) agree. Among conservatives, 25 percent agree.

Is it acceptable to use violence to stop a campus speech? A quarter (25 percent) of liberals approve. For conservatives, the figure is 16 percent.

Not surprisingly, liberals are more comfortable expressing themselves on campus than conservatives are. As we might expect, 53 percent of college students describe themselves as “left of center”; only 20 percent identify as “right of center.”

When students were asked which subjects were the most difficult to have a conversation about on campus, they mentioned abortion, racial inequality, Covid mandates and transgender issues as the most difficult. With the exception of Covid restrictions, this reflects the Left’s obsession with sex and race.

A recent survey conducted for Newsweek found that 44 percent of those aged 25-34 want to make “misgendering” a person—using the “wrong” pronoun to describe a transgender person—a criminal offense. Among those aged 35-44, 38 percent support treating this as a crime. The overall figure for Americans is 19 percent.

Only in times of war has there traditionally been support for muzzling free speech. But we are not at war, so there is no

need to balance free speech with national security. What we are witnessing today is unlike anything we've seen before.

There has been next to zero media outcry over this condition. Yet the assault on the First Amendment is palpable.

The reason for this situation should be obvious to those not drugged by ideology: it is young liberals, indoctrinated by teachers, especially professors, who are the most intolerant, and those who work in the media are so thoroughly politicized these days as to be unmoved by what is happening.

All this talk about "Christian nationalists" being a threat to free speech is a ruse. The real threat is coming from the Left, the very same persons guilty of blaming their favorite bogeyman—Christians.

Unfortunately, many Catholic colleges and universities are not doing a good job ensuring freedom of speech on campus, either. Especially notorious are Jesuit-run institutions of higher education.

In the 2022-2023 survey by FIRE, Georgetown was rated #200. Only three schools out of a total of 203 were rated worse; Columbia University was dead last. The Catholic school with the best free speech rating was the University of Notre Dame.

Georgetown shows such contempt for free speech that it merited a special section in the study. Three specific cases, all very serious, were cited.

In 2022, Ilya Shapiro was suspended over a tweet thread in which he criticized President Biden's pledge to nominate a black woman to the Supreme Court. Dean William Treanor issued a statement denouncing the tweets, insisting that Georgetown is committed to "inclusion, belonging, and respect for diversity." [Note: Treanor said nothing about Georgetown's commitment to academic freedom.] Shapiro was eventually reinstated, but the damage was done; he subsequently resigned.

In 2021, Sandra Sellers was fired over a viral video in which she was unknowingly recorded talking to her colleague, David Batson, about the relatively poor performance of black students in her class. Dean Treanor condemned the two of them, pledging commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. Batson later resigned following the backlash.

In 2021, Timothy Wickham-Crowley made jokes in class that evoked racial stereotypes and for dropping the n-word when reading aloud from a course textbook. He was investigated by the Office of Institutional Diversity, Equity, and Affirmative Action. While it was determined that his conduct was not “severe or pervasive,” he was no longer asked to teach again.

These incidents say nothing about the way students, especially conservative students, feel about freely expressing their thoughts on campus. But Georgetown didn’t earn a lousy rating on the basis of muzzling the free speech of faculty alone.

It should be pointed out that Georgetown’s fidelity to Catholic teachings has long been questioned. It has two pro-abortion clubs on campus: H*YAS for Choice for undergraduates, and Georgetown Law Students for Reproductive Justice. It has no racist clubs on campus—nor should it—but it has no problem allowing pro-abortion clubs. For liberals, racism is clearly more offensive than child abuse in the womb.

The FIRE survey taken in 2021, which included over 37,000 students at over 150 colleges and universities, found that among Catholic institutions, none were in the top twenty. In fact, none were in the top one hundred. But there were three among the worst: Fordham was tenth from the bottom (#145); Boston College was fourth from the bottom (#151) and Marquette was second to last (#153). All three are Jesuit-run institutions.

While Fordham is a disgrace, it is clear from reading the report that Boston College and Marquette are much worse. Free

speech is so under fire at Marquette that the FIRE survey gave it special mention.

“For two years running—in 2015 and 2016 (for the years 2014 and 2015)—FIRE named Marquette one of the ten worst colleges for free speech because of its attempts to revoke the tenure of Professor John McAdams and then terminate him. It took more than three years, but McAdams ultimately won his lawsuit against the university and was reinstated to his faculty position in the fall of 2018.”

What did McAdams do that made a faculty panel recommend sanctions against him? He complained when a graduate instructor tried to muzzle the free speech of a conservative student. In November 2014, McAdams criticized Cheryl Abbate for telling a student she would no longer tolerate his position objecting to gay marriage in her ethics class. McAdams was subsequently fired. He sued.

In July 2018, Marquette said it would comply with a court order from the Wisconsin Supreme Court to reinstate McAdams. Abbate was not just a graduate student—she was paid as an instructor by the university.

It was the free speech of McAdams that was endangered, not Abbate’s. Indeed, she was the one who was guilty of stifling free speech, and by a student who defended the Church’s teachings on marriage at a supposedly Catholic university!

Previously, in 2014, the Catholic League criticized Marquette for telling employees at an “anti-harassment” training presentation that merely voicing objections to gay marriage may be considered discriminatory; they were urged to report such offenses. At that time, I raised the following question. “Would they bring the pope up on charges following a speech on marriage?”

What’s going on at these Jesuit schools? Why are they breeding such intolerance? All four of them are known for their

progressive policies, yet when it comes to free speech they are among the most regressive in the nation.

Just as with secular colleges, these Jesuit schools appear to get exercised over the free speech of its conservative students. What makes this so perverse is that typically these students hold to orthodox Catholic teachings on abortion, marriage, the family, and sexuality. Yet it seems that dissident students are more protected discussing their views than are conservative students.

I know from my 20 years teaching in Catholic schools the great good that many loyal faculty members have done. But I also know from first-hand experience that many administrators and faculty—not just a few—have no interest in furthering Catholic objectives and are indeed intolerant of them. They operate as termites within these schools, undermining the mission of Catholic education.

The time has come for those who run Georgetown, Fordham, Boston College and Marquette to have a campus-wide forum on the root causes of Jesuit intolerance for freedom of speech. Ditto for all those non-Jesuit schools that are more respectful of dissident voices on campus than they are in protecting the free speech rights of orthodox Catholic students and faculty.