

**“The Intellectual Climate at Colgate:
Campus Free Speech in the Age of Safe Spaces and Trumpism”**

By Robert Kraynak, Colgate University
Address to Fairfield County Alumni Club, March 11, 2017

Hi Everyone – It is great to see all the Colgate alums here, friends and former students. I am Robert Kraynak, professor of political science and the director of the Center for Freedom and Western Civilization. I have been teaching here at Colgate for 38 years, mostly political philosophy and general education. I have taught several generations of Colgate students – I came here in 1978, and some of my first students from the 1980’s have now sent their children here, and they have taken courses with me. I call these children of former students, my ‘grand-students.’

I hope to continue teaching here for another 10 or 20 years, challenging Prof. Balmuth and Prof. Aveni for most blue-book final exams ever graded – this will not be easy. They started back in days of an eight course teaching load, so I am going to have to continue to age 85 to catch up. This upset a recent dean of the faculty, who a few years ago offered incentives for old folks like me to retire. He sent out a letter with financial incentives to retire, and I replied with a sly remark, “Not dead yet.” I still love teaching and scholarship, so I hope to continue for quite a while longer. So please send me your children when the time comes, and I hope that these ‘grand-students’ will also be able to learn some political philosophy from Prof. Kraynak.

Well, that’s enough for the jokes. Now I would like to turn to a serious topic, which I hope will not upset your dinner. My topic is the campus intellectual and political climate which everyone is discussing. In particular, I would like to

talk about the questions surrounding intellectual diversity and openness to ideas, with special focus on challenges to freedom of expression. These issues relate to the state of liberal arts education, and the impact it has on the intellectual and political climate of the country, today and in future.

Let me begin by admitting that is difficult to know what to believe about what is taking place on our college campuses. One of the difficulties is hearing about the high profile media events which are disturbing, like the violence at Berkeley over Milo or the mob scene at Middlebury over Charles Murray or some of the protests by Black Lives Matters. These events contrast with the day to day life on campus, which is fairly calm and reasonable and co-operative and does not feel like the campuses of the late 1960's and 70's when I was in college at Cornell – when protests, sit- ins, riots, and violence were regular features. Today is not the 1960's, but in some ways the 1960's never ended, and the campus climate today is influenced by those events, as I shall explain later. In addition, there is the new external factor of the rise of Trump and a mood of anxiety among people who feel threatened or marginalized in this era. So, what should we believe? What is fact or fiction, illusion or reality? It is hard to sort out, so I offer these remarks as my observations on the current situation, and I will be glad to hear other impressions and reactions

On the one side, we hear about minorities feeling excluded by campus culture or demeaned by programs neglecting their intellectual interests; we also hear about sexual assault and lack of attention to victim's rights. Recently, college presidents like Brian Casey put out regular bulletins expressing concerns for international students, foreign visitors, and others who feel threatened or unwelcome. These are serious issues that receive considerable publicity, and they

need to be investigated and aired with transparency for the safety and well-being of all concerned. But there are several problems exist in assessing these situations.

Take the issue of sexual assault on campus. Title IX (of the 1972 Education Acts prohibiting sex discrimination) has led to investigations of campus assaults; investigations are taking place at more than 40 leading universities, but actual facts are hard to get, and they are sometimes confusing due to imprecise definitions of what is an assault – any “unwanted touching”? “incapacitation” or force? Some sources say 1 in 5 have been victims, some say 1 in 20 women (Stuart Taylor says, 1 in 50) on campus have been assaulted. The statistics at Colgate are kind of unclear, and the HERI reports were disregarded as “mere data” in Colgate’s 2015 protests in favor of personal narratives. Yet, both are needed. A second problem is balancing rights of victims vs. rights of accused. This is agonizing, with lack of clear due process by the Title IX coordinator, and criminal charges being handled by university procedures that are woefully inadequate. Also, new legal standards of a “preponderance of the evidence” and phrases like “hostile environment” are fuzzy, and the intrusion of the federal departments of justice and education and now NY state law (“Enough is Enough”) make it high stakes. I honestly don’t know what to think, since there are clearly serious problems of people being unsafe and feeling unsafe; but campuses are special legal islands and special cultural islands that don’t have good means of handling problems involving criminal charges – and meanwhile, day to day life goes on in a fairly normal fashion.

A related concern is with the safety of minority and international students on campus. I detect greater anxiety over visa and travel plans, but not a decrease in numbers of foreign students or participation in campus life.

On the other side, we also hear criticisms of universities for fostering a climate that is too sensitive to feelings, too focused on creating ‘safe spaces’ for students in order to protect them from opposing viewpoints or challenging ideas. Sometimes the ideas themselves have been called ‘micro-aggressions’ and ‘cultural appropriations’ and demands are made for ‘trigger warnings’ in classes for ideas and books that might upset students. The atmosphere of ‘political correctness’ is also cited as creating an atmosphere of censorship or self-censorship, and for causing some high-profile speakers to be banned or dis-invited from campuses after protests from students and faculty. Some of the people involved are quite surprising, as you may be aware from other campuses.

Among entertainers – Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock, and Bill Maher are comedians who have said they do not wish to perform on college campuses anymore because their jokes are considered offensive to sensitive students.

Among leading political figures – there are numerous speakers who were disinvited, or withdrew after protests: Condoleezza Rice, secretary of state under George Bush (withdrew from Rutgers), Christine LaGarde, IMF director (dis-invited from Smith), Ray Kelly, NY city police chief (shouted down at Brown), Ayaan Hirsi Ali Somali-born political activist and now US resident (dis-invited from Brandeis). Recently, the protests shutting down Milo and Murray (although he came to Colgate in the fall without incidents).

Let me go back a few years and refer to the comedians: In 2014, an invitation to Bill Maher from UC Berkeley ignited protests, and a petition to prevent him from speaking was signed by 2500 students and faculty for insulting Islam; eventually, the president of the university over-rode the protests and Maher

gave the commencement address (The Guardian, Oct. 2014). When Chris Rock was asked about the attempt to ban Bill Maher, Chris said in an interview:

“I love Bill, but I stopped playing at colleges, and the reason is because they’re way too conservative ... Not in their political views – it’s not like they’re voting Republican – but in their social views and their willingness not to offend anybody. Kids raised on a culture of ‘We’re not going to keep score in the game because we don’t want anybody to lose.’ Or just ignoring race to a fault. You can’t say, ‘that black kid over there.’ No, you have to say, ‘it’s the guy with the red shoes.’ You can’t even be offensive on your way to being inoffensive.’ ” (Vulture.com/2014)

Another example: Former NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg gave a commencement speech last year at the U of Michigan in which he strongly criticized the new campus climate of avoiding difficult ideas or viewpoints that might be considered offensive:

“The fact that some university administrations now bow to pressure and shield students from these ideas through ‘safe spaces’ and ‘trigger warnings’ is in my view a terrible mistake. The whole purpose of college is to learn how to deal with difficult situations, not run away from them ... And one of the most dangerous places on a college campus is a safe space, because it creates the false impression that we can insulate ourselves from those with different views. We can’t do this and we shouldn’t try ... In the global economy and in a democratic society, an open mind is the most valuable asset you can possess.’ (Bloomberg.com, April 30, 2016)

Another critic, Nicholas Kristof, a journalist for the NY Times, wrote an editorial entitled, “A Confession of Liberal Intolerance” (May 7, 2016):

“Universities are the bedrock of progressive values, but the one kind of diversity that universities disregard is ideological and religious conservatism. We’re fine with people who don’t look like us, **as long as they think like us**. OK, that’s a little harsh. But consider George Yancey, a sociologist who is black and an evangelical [Christian]. He said, “Outside of academia I faced more problems as a black [person] ... But inside academia I face more problems as a Christian, and it is not even close ...

Kristof concludes with the warning: “If universities lose intellectual diversity ... they die. And this is what has been happening since the 1990’s.”

You may ask: Is this a true or accurate account of our universities? And, if it is true, how did it happen? One can cite statistics showing a huge imbalance of ideological viewpoints among university faculty and scholars, but that does not get us to the qualitative problem of intellectual intolerance.

A deeper explanation is offered in an Atlantic Monthly article that received a lot of attention, “The Coddling of the American Mind” (Sept. 2015) by Greg Lukianoff. He argues that the new view of education emphasizes “emotional well-being,” and this has shifted the focus from critical thinking emphasizing evidence, argument, debate to “emotional reasoning” emphasizing subjective expression of feelings and personal identities. Lukianoff also cites a change in the Department of Education’s interpretation of civil rights discrimination: In 2003 the standard for discrimination was speech that was “objectively offensive” to a “reasonable person”; since 2013, the standard was broadened to include verbal conduct that is simply “unwelcome.” The changes give legal support for emotional offenses, that can be mostly subjective.

But you may ask: Do these attitudes really affect the campus climate of liberal education today, at Colgate and other places?

In my experience in the universities over the last 40 years, they do affect the character of liberal education: We are losing the ideal of a “legitimate debate” through rational discourse in which both sides or all sides are given a fair hearing because certain viewpoints are considered off-limits or too offensive to discuss.

It is nearly impossible to discuss many topics on campus without restricting the debate to views that offend no one and creating the presumption that there is

only one acceptable viewpoint – for example, Islam, immigration, abortion, marriage, multiculturalism, climate change, feminism, the Bible, Western civilization, the Republican party, and of course, Donald Trump. In fact, one reason so many academics missed the rise of Trump was the inability to even fathom people supporting him, especially people from the disenfranchised white working classes: How many academics know an unemployed coal miner, a NASCAR driver, or a street cop? Another major issue totally missed by academics due to ideological blinders was – the end of the Cold War; it was simply assumed that the communist system could not be rolled back, since it was part of progressive history. And of course, everyone missed the rise of Islam after the Cold War because it was assumed by secular academics that religion was a dying force in the modern world. And even today, it is hard to get a fair hearing for Samuel Huntington’s book, “The Clash of Civilizations” – whether you agree with it or not, it is a major work that needs a legitimate debate. And, of course, the rise of nationalism in Russia and Europe and the British exit from the EU – these possibilities are almost unthinkable for those with a certain view of progressive history. They are barely treated as real, for example, Brexit decision discussed at Harvard Kennedy School in order to deplore rather than understand.

In my own classes, I have found that it is harder and harder, for example, to teach the Lincoln-Douglas debates in a way that makes the debate plausible to students. And it is more difficult to teach the classics of Western culture in a way that gives them a fair hearing rather than treating them as the prejudices of ‘dead-white-males’: This makes our culture more and more shallow by depriving us of the timeless wisdom of ancient texts, classical and Biblical thought. And it affects scholarly analysis of reality, whether one likes these developments or not, to think that others could never think a certain way. Ironically, it is often those who speak

most strongly in favor of ‘multiculturalism’ who seek knowledge of other cultures but see them only through the image of Western liberalism (e.g., feminists who see criticism of Islam as intolerant, without acknowledging its hostility to their values).

So, it is not only difficult to get a hearing for ideas that do not fit the politically correct mold of thinking; but the dismissal of serious alternatives has consequences for how we view the world and how we live our lives. There are indeed threats and dangers to the university from external pressures arising from culture and political wars, and from the rise of Trumpism as arrogant nationalism or nativism; but there are also perils from within the university that are just as stifling and in certain ways more difficult to detect and combat because they often go under the banner of diversity, multiculturalism, progressive thinking, and sensitivity to vulnerable people.

So, for my final thoughts, I would like to go a little deeper into some philosophy, and ask: What is the cause of the underlying blind spots in liberal arts education, and especially how do we explain the growing appeals **to subjective offense as a veto over free speech?** I would trace the problems to the influence of two philosophers on the intellectual climate of today, to the power of two German philosophers who in many ways seem opposed but have been combined by many modern intellectuals – I mean Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx.

From Nietzsche, we get the idea that Truth is not an objective standard that reason can discover in the cosmos and man. All claims of truth are merely subjective, and all values are relative to the individual or to the historical period in which they arose. Hence, there is no foundation for values beyond the will to power of the people who assert them. There are only “perspectives” that reflect subjective expressions of the will. But if nothing is really true, it follows that

rational discussion is meaningless: There is no Truth, there is only Power. I believe that this Nietzschean insight is the source of today's emphasis on subjective feeling and identity which undermines rational discourse in education.

But Nietzsche's insight is only partially adopted today. It is watered down and made democratic and egalitarian by adding Marx's idea of equality as found in a universal classless society. This combination is odd, since Nietzsche's idea of the will to power was harsh and elitist, although he thought it was noble: it would produce a world where the strong would dominate the weak because there was no such thing as truth, or reason, or justice, only power. Nietzsche's insights are selectively used by intellectuals today to discard reason and to tear down traditional values, but they are inconsistently combined with the view that all subjective expressions of value have equal validity – without any need to justify them. And so we have Nietzsche and Marx together, producing the equality of all subjective opinions that shapes the intellectual climate of our times. Their strange hybrid has led to the claim of subjective offense by anyone to justify a veto over free speech.

Well – I suppose that is enough philosophy for the evening. It is a long story about how the ideas of these two German philosophers came to dominate our American and European universities. You can read about in *The Closing of the American Mind*, by Alan Bloom (1987). His book shows how we arrived at the strange situation of our universities today where those using the rhetoric of 'openness' and 'diversity' and 'inclusiveness' have created a new kind of intolerance that shuts down rational debate on issues that violate the sense that all are equally entitled to subjective expression without the need for rational

justification. In this way, the liberal arts have become illiberal, and diversity has become a pretext for intellectual conformity. At the same time, external pressures from new political currents like Trumpism may produce a backlash of withholding of funds from universities that suppress unpopular opinions, creating a cycle of fear and outrage. My concern is that the great ideal of Truth through rational discussion is fading from our universities.

In response, several universities have sought to publicly affirm the commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression. Leading the way has been the University of Chicago and its president, Robert Zimmer. He has become a national leader in the academy for his forthright statement of the Chicago principle – that students who come to UC will not be coddled, there are no ‘safe spaces,’ speakers will not be ‘dis-invited’ because of their controversial or unpopular or offensive views, that students will be challenged intellectually by exposure to difficult ideas, that one must “the argument” for one’s views, positions, and theories on any subject. Several other universities such as Colgate have resolutions before the faculty, the student Senate, and the board of trustees re-affirming our commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression. President Zimmer has been invited to come to Colgate by the Center for Freedom and president Casey, and Zimmer will be coming on March 30 to make the argument for the Chicago principles.

Well, I hope I have not upset you for your dinner. I would like to leave you tonight with the challenge of restoring the great ideal of the quest for Truth through rational discourse, including all points of view (liberal, conservative, and radical) to our universities.

Perhaps we can look at the Colgate seal, and be inspired by our Colgate Motto: *Deo ac Veritate* – for God and for Truth:

Is that motto just a quaint slogan of a bygone era, or is it still an ideal for us today?

Think about it, and share your thoughts with me.

Thank you and good evening.
