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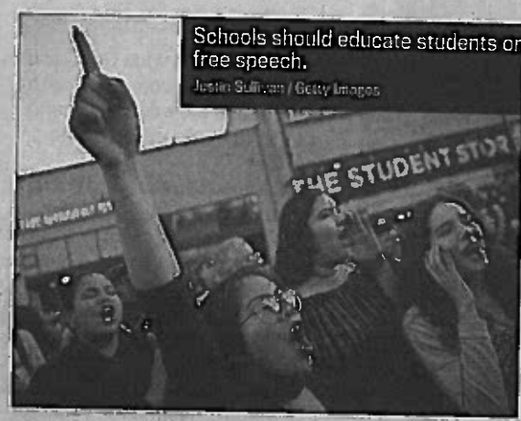
OUR EDITORIAL

Can diverse views survive on campus?

New report shows a majority of college students don't understand First Amendment, free speech

Conservative firebrand Ben Shapiro gave a speech this month at the University of California, Berkeley. And while that's a victory for any right-leaning speaker these days, it cost $600,000 on security measures to make it happen and keep Shapiro safe.



Schools should educate students on free speech.
Justin Sullivan / Getty Images

So much for "free" speech.

Berkeley may be on the far end of the intolerance spectrum, but it is far from alone. Dozens of speakers get disinvited — or shouted down — every year by students and university administrators uncomfortable with the message they bring to campus.

Free expression is hotly debated these days, and many are up in arms over the ridiculous (and uncalled for) spat between President Trump and a growing number of NFL players refusing to stand for the national anthem — which they have every right to do thanks to the First Amendment. The Rev. Jesse Jackson was in Detroit Monday to defend these players.

Anyone who cares about free speech should be extremely alarmed by a new study from Brookings that highlights why so many college students have become known as snowflakes.

John Villasenor, a nonresident senior fellow in governance studies at Brookings, wrote the report. As he notes, "colleges and universities are places where intellectual debate should flourish."

That doesn't seem to be happening because many students don't have a solid understanding of the First Amendment and what kind of speech it protects. And students will take those views with them into adulthood. The ramifications are huge.

"If a significant percentage of students believe that views they find offensive should be silenced, those views will in fact be silenced," Villasenor writes. "Freedom of expression is deeply imperiled on U.S. campuses."

The First Amendment protects a wide swath of speech — the good, bad and the ugly. Unprotected speech is a narrow band, and includes speech inciting imminent lawless action and true threats.

Yet that's not what many college students believe. In a survey of 1,500 U.S. college students, Villasenor found:

- Fewer than half the students polled (across the political spectrum) think hate speech is protected by law.
- Sixty-two percent of Democrats and 39 percent of Republicans agree that it is acceptable to shout down a speaker they don't like; roughly 20 percent of students from both parties think violence is acceptable to silence speech.
- More than 60 percent of all students believe the First Amendment requires a college organization to offer a countering viewpoint when a speaker comes to campus.
- Sixty-one percent of Democrats want a campus environment that shelters them from offensive or biased viewpoints; 53 percent of GOP students would rather have a robust campus that exposes them to a variety of views.

These numbers demonstrate a significant misunderstanding of one of the most fundamental pieces of our Constitution. Clearly, universities must do better to foster free speech on campus. But K-12 schools and higher ed institutions should also ensure students have a foundation in these principles.

Michigan's Hillsdale College requires all students take a course on the Constitution, regardless of their major.

More should do the same.