



Don't Speak Don't Think

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Keith John Sampson, a mature-aged student from a university in Indianapolis, did nothing more than read a book in public. But in 2007, it cost him his reputation and employment prospects.

Following a complaint by his peers, he was found guilty of 'racial harassment' for openly reading a book that was 'related to a historically and racially abhorrent subject.' The book was titled *Notre Dame vs. the Klan* and had a grainy black and white image of Klan members on its cover. Never mind that the book actually opposed the organisation, or that the subtitle clearly printed on the book's cover read 'How the fighting Irish defeated the Ku Klux Klan', or that it was available in the college's library. With chilling disregard for due process or any semblance of freedom of expression, the campus judiciary pronounced him guilty of racial harassment.

*Unlearning Liberty* by Greg Lukianoff of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) is



full to the brim with a decade's worth of case studies concerning serious infringements of individual liberties in universities across the United States. Every time you think you've read the worst of these, an even more outrageous one rears its head.

In 2012, the University of Missouri-St. Louis required its students to give six weeks' notice of any demonstrations and banned criticism of the university by prohibiting anything which would 'discredit the student body or UM-St. Louis'. In 2005, Washington State University actually bought theatre tickets for an angry mob of students and coached them on how best to disrupt a provocative stage show which the university considered too controversial. Several universities in the last decade have erected tiny, out-of-the-way 'free speech zones', sometimes dubbed 'free speech cages', where all campus pamphleteering, demonstrations and expressions of political views must be confined.

Lukianoff does not write as a conservative, but from a left-wing perspective. Nevertheless he mounts a powerful defence for classical liberal rights—especially freedom of speech.

To Lukianoff, literally everything collapses if freedom of speech is taken away. The unique economic and political systems of Western society (along with countless advances in modern science) could not have come into existence without the support of a culture that valued freedom of speech. Our preference for free enquiry rather than blunt force in disputes has saved our society, unlike so many before us, from descending into stagnation, ignorance, and oppression.

The value of free speech must be learned, as it is otherwise very difficult for students to understand why it is so important to protect dissent. But when schools, colleges and universities punish students for speaking their minds, they teach students the very opposite of what our society needs to survive and flourish. They teach students to shy away from voicing dissent, to be thin-skinned, and to accept censorship as a valid means for promoting an officially held cause. Hence the main concern of this book is that many universities strongly encourage students to unlearn liberty, to discount fundamental rights as mere legalisms, and to be apathetic when these rights are threatened.

The University of Delaware's Residence Life program (which was suspended in 2007) was perhaps the worst and most flagrant violation of the students' freedom of conscience. Students were required to attend one-on-one sessions with their Residence Assistant, in which they would be asked such prying questions as 'When did you discover your sexual identity?' and 'Would you be comfortable dating ... a person with different religious beliefs than yours?' It was aimed at promoting diversity, but it punished nonconformity. In clinical, Orwellian fashion, the Residence Life officials referred to this mandatory four year program as a 'treatment' which should 'leave a mental footprint on [students'] consciousness'. It was an indoctrination program, mandatory and partly state-sponsored, as the University of Delaware receives both private and public funding. Such a program deserved much wider public condemnation than it ever got.

Lukianoff's findings should be deeply troubling to anyone who cherishes freedom of speech, as well as freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, freedom of association, and the right of due process. The students who graduate from university believing that advocating free speech is



equivalent to advocating hate speech will be the country's voters, politicians, lawyers and general citizens of years to come. Already, as the author noted in the afterword, the universities' growing disdain for the freedom of speech has left its mark on the mindset of the younger generation.

According to a 2013 survey, while only 23 per cent of Americans over the age of 60 believe that 'the first amendment goes too far', a whopping 47 per cent of individuals between the ages of eighteen and 30 hold that view.

The one consolation that weaves throughout this book is that whenever students have prosecuted the universities for violating their constitutional rights, the overwhelming majority of court decisions ruled in favour of the students and not the authoritarian universities. The universities' power trips simply could not stand up to external scrutiny.

Let's be wary that the culture at our Australian universities doesn't reproduce the same ideal of a 'diverse' campus in which dissent and alternate opinions are quashed.