

# **Free Speech and Social Justice: Opposite Sides of the Same Coin**

Kevin Ray

Joint Concentration in Computer Science and Government

GENED 1039

I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code.

## **Abstract:**

College campuses have long been at the forefront of activism, social justice, and free speech. For most of the history of campus activism, these movements worked together, recognizing that they had to rely on each other to reach their goals. However, recently it seems to be that these movements have moved against each other. Many campus social justice movements do not look favorably on campus free speech movements and vice versa. The goal of this research project is to determine and analyze the current attitudes toward free speech and social justice movements on campus and the factors that have contributed to these feelings, both political and social. The results of this research can help students and administrators learn more about what is driving both movements and how students feel about the efficacy of each movement.

College campuses have long been seen as bastions of free speech and ground zero for social justice movements. Dating back to the 1960s and 1970s, students across the country led one of the largest protest movements in American history against the Vietnam War and the Cold War right on their school campuses. When students used their campus as platforms to speak against authority, the authority did not respond kindly. Schools and universities tried to shut down student protests and movements. Therefore, many students had to use the principles of free speech to fight for their right to protest on campus. Thus, the free speech movements and student protest movements became one—fighting together for similar causes. Culminating in *Tinker v. Des Moines*, the movements fought to secure students' right to free speech and, by extension, protest (Dhingra 2019, p. 658).

However, more recently it seems that campus protest and social justice movements and campus free speech movements seem to be on opposite sides in battle. As seen most recently on Harvard's own campus in the situation regarding GOV 50 in the Fall 2020 semester. As part of the course, a controversial guest was invited to campus to speak to students (Chen 2020). Many students felt uncomfortable with this guest speaking to the class, based on prior comments that the guest made (Chen 2020). However, the professor defended the decision, citing free speech and the necessity for opposing viewpoints (Chen 2020). And so, free speech and social justice moved to opposite sides, outwardly opposing each other. Social justice movements argued that, while free speech is important, students being able to feel safe and supported on campus was more important. Free speech movements argued that college campuses are supposed to be places where free dialogue is encouraged and that colleges have moved away from this principle in favor of making students feel overly comfortable. The university appeared to play both sides, not outwardly supporting either movement (Chen 2020).

This evolution of attitudes toward both social justice and free speech on campus is the driving motivation behind this research project. Researching and understanding these situations is important, not just to students, but to faculty and administrators who may feel stuck between a rock and a hard place when it comes to protecting both rights to protest and rights to free speech. This research project will address the questions of how attitudes toward free speech and social justice movements have changed over time, and what factors are influencing current attitudes toward free speech and social justice movements. Furthermore, this research project is an empirical project. While I do dive into the history of free speech and social justice on campus, I also spend significant time analyzing current attitudes to both free speech and social justice on campus, and what factors are influencing them. To do this, I surveyed students of different demographic groups (e.g. race, gender, political beliefs) to understand their feelings toward these two campus movements and what these movements mean for their place on campus.

### *Literature Review*

The idea of free speech and social justice being on opposite sides of the same issues is not a new idea—there is a copious amount of research and analysis relating to the historical relationship of free speech and social justice on college campuses, as well as studies into current student attitudes toward free speech and social justice on campus.

“Student and Administrative Responses to Collective Action on Campus” provides great insight and context to the impact of the tenuous relationship between free speech and social justice on universities. As the rise of both protests for social justice and free speech have expanded on college campuses, campus administrators have struggled to find the bridge between making sure all students feel safe and on

campus while ensuring that all students feel welcome to exercise their free speech on campus (Lockard 2019, p. 185). This puts into context the potential results of this study. It is important for both students and administrators to understand how students feel about the movements that are occurring on campus so that the university is able to make informed decisions with guidance from students.

“Student Free Speech and Schools as Public Spaces” takes a strict approach relating to campus speech, arguing that the most important right that students reserve while at school is the right to free speech. Since colleges are institutions of learning, students should feel welcome to exercise free speech and institutions should do all possible to protect their free speech (Dhingra 2019, p. 659). This view of free speech can be at odds with the views of many students who believe that while free speech is important and should be protected as much as possible, the main priority for the university and its administration should be creating a welcoming environment where all students feel safe. These distinct views can be seen as the origins of the split between free speech and social justice movements. In the course of this study, there are likely to be students that have views that reflect those argued by Dhindra, and the insight argued by Dhingra can provide context as to what these views mean and what role they play in the broader climate relating to free speech on campus

“Activism, Free Speech, and Power” by Nancy Thomas brings together the ideas from all of the previous literature and discusses the evolution of free speech and discussion on campuses, and how conflict and disagreement between students can contribute to the witnessed divide between free speech and social justice. While college campuses have long been seen as the original space for discussion and disagreement as means for learning, even these campuses are no longer immune to the passion and division that is being witnessed throughout the rest of the country (Thomas 2019, p. 21). As noted by Thomas, many of the contemporary cases of clashing between social justice and free speech come from the idea of political correctness. As college campuses move to become spaces where all students can feel welcome and safe to express themselves, there has been a backlash against the idea of political correctness,

where colleges take action against inflammatory speech that might be harmful to other students (Thomas 2019, p. 24). Naturally, this has caused social justice movements on campus, which are typically led by and for minority and underrepresented students, to come at odds with free speech movements, which are fighting back against political correctness. This idea provides an interesting explanation for whatever results are found in this study. Students who respond that they feel negatively toward current free speech movements might be students who identify with minority or underrepresented groups, while students who feel positively toward current free speech might be against the idea of political correctness.

Additionally, there is a lot of research that provides methodological guidance for this study. Most comprehensively, the Heterodox Academy annual study “Understanding the Campus Expression Climate” provides extensive methodological insights and can provide a guide for data collection and analysis on this topic. This study interviewed students of different demographics groups across multiple campuses around the country on their views toward free speech, discussion of controversial topics, and diversity of viewpoints on the college campuses (Stikma 2020). The sampling methods used in the Heterodox Academy study have greatly influenced the sampling methods used in this study. In creating a sample, Heterodox Academy attempted to get a range of students that were representative of the total population of college students in America; diversity in race, gender, political ideology, sexuality, religion, and area of study were all achieved to gain insights from as many types of students as possible (Stikma 2020). This level of insight is what can be hoped to be achieved from this study. By interviewing a diverse range of students on the Harvard College campus, which is diverse in some aspects but monolithic in others, this study can better understand what is driving the current attitudes toward free speech and social justice on the campus.

## **Free Speech and Social Justice on Harvard's Campus Survey**

### *Methodology*

This survey was conducted through an online survey sent to selected samples of students across Harvard University. One entire Harvard first-year entryway, averaging 30 students, was invited to participate in the survey providing roughly a 17% response rate. Since all Harvard students are randomly assigned to their First-Year Dorms/Entryways, each entryway can be seen as representative of the first-year population as a whole, and the first-year population can be representative of the entire undergraduate population of Harvard.

The survey included questions about the student's opinions on current social justice movements and controversies relating to free speech on campus, the student's demographics, and how those demographics shape their attitudes towards social justice and free speech on campus. The survey questions were divided into four sections: Free Speech Ideals, Free Speech on Campus, Social Justice on Campus, and Demographics. In the demographic section, respondents reported their class year, gender, race, sexual identity, and political affiliation. The full set of interview questions are listed in Appendix A.

However, there are limitations to this survey methodology. By exclusively interviewing students at Harvard University, this study is limited to students who have experienced free speech and social justice on a liberal, elite university campus. This is not representative of the average college student in the United States, and therefore the results are biased to the type of institution that the study was conducted at. Additionally, by conducting this study through an online survey, there will be a loss of personality and nuance that would occur when students are able to verbalize their own responses in a personal setting. However, this option of using an online survey will give us a wider array of data that is easier to synthesize and interpret. Furthermore, there was not

enough demographic data to conclude how certain demographics responded to free speech and social justice. This prevents us from analyzing demographics as a factor in current student attitudes towards free speech and social justice.

### *Findings*

Each response to a question had a corresponding point value. These response point values were tallied to assign each respondent a point value for each section. The points values for the sections were then compared to determine whether the respondent's responses were more pro-free speech or pro-social justice. Of the total responses, 25% of respondents were pro-free speech, 25% were pro-social justice, and 50% were equal. The survey found that there was an inverse relationship between approval of free speech activism and approval of social justice activism. Among all respondents, respondents with higher social justice scores had lower free speech scores and vice versa.

The study also found that 75% of students gave full approval of the idea of free speech, however only 50% of students approved of free speech activism. 50% of respondents rated social justice positively, 25% of respondents had mixed feelings for social justice, and 25% of respondents disapproved of social justice. However, the only students who did not give full approval to free speech are pro-social justice students, and the only students who disapproved of social justice movements were pro-free speech. This further signals an inverse relationship between free speech and social justice.

The results of the Free Speech and Social Justice on Harvard's Campus survey can be further put into context with the results of the "Class of 2024: By The Numbers" survey by the Harvard Crimson. The survey, which had a 76% response rate from the entire Harvard first-year class, addressed both Harvard and Non-Harvard free speech and social justice issues. This survey found that 30% of Harvard first-year were not

concerned about free speech, 26.6% were concerned, 30.5% were neither concerned nor unconcerned, and 12.9% did not have enough information. This shows for most Harvard first-years, free speech is not a major issue for them to be concerned about while on campus.

## **GENED 1039 - Campus Expression Survey**

### *Methodology*

This survey was conducted through an online survey sent to a full sample of students enrolled in Harvard Faculty of Arts and Science's GENED 1039 Higher Education: Students, Institutions, and Controversies. The course has 27 enrolled students and the survey had roughly an 82% response rate.

The survey included questions about the student's opinions on controversies relating to free speech on campus, campus culture, and the role University Administration can play in shaping the campus culture. The survey questions were divided into five sections: Consequence Items, Campus Experience - Treatment, Viewpoint Diversity, Freedom of Expression, and Demographics. In the demographic section, respondents reported their class year, gender, race, sexual identity, concentration, and political affiliation. The full set of interview questions are listed in Appendix B.

However, there are limitations to this survey methodology that are similar to those of the Free Speech and Social Justice on Harvard's Campus survey. By exclusively interviewing students at Harvard University, this study is limited to students who have experienced free speech and social justice on a liberal, elite university campus. However, the additional limitation of only interviewing students from the GENED 1039 course is present in this survey. Students in the GENED 1039 class are likely to be interested in learning about or studying higher education or sociology. This, along with the respondents being students at Harvard College, can add bias to the



sample that is not necessarily representative of the average college student in the United States. Additionally, similar to the Free Speech and Social Justice on Harvard's Campus survey, this study was conducted by online survey. With this method, there will be a loss of personality and nuance that would occur when students are able to verbalize their own responses in a personal setting. However, this option of using an online survey will give us a wider array of data that is easier to synthesize and interpret.

### *Findings*

The results of the GENED 1039 - Campus Expression Survey portray a campus culture that has used social justice to limit free speech on campus. The survey found that about 4 in 10 respondents were at least slightly concerned that expressing their views could lead to their professor lowering their grade and almost 7 in 10 respondents feared that expressing their opinions could lead to other students criticizing their views on social media. This shows that student respondents feel that they have to be limiting and censoring themselves to avoid repercussions, even without official University policies or intervention.

Furthermore, the results of the survey show that over 60% of students feel it's appropriate to use noise to drown out offensive speakers and prevent them from speaking. While students felt that there was a culture that prevented students from being able to express their views on campus, they also felt that students had the right to protest and express their disapproval when these views are potentially offensive. This recognition of both sides can potentially be seen as the driving force behind the division between free speech and social justice on campus.

### *Conclusion*

The results from the Free Speech and Social Justice on Harvard's Campus survey and the GENED 1039 - Campus Expression Survey found that there was general disapproval of the current climate relating to both free speech and social justice on Harvard's campus. Both surveys found that, while most students themselves are not concerned about their own free speech on campus, they believe that campus culture doesn't allow for all students to freely speak on campus. However, both surveys also show that students feel it is necessary to take steps to ensure a healthy and safe campus for all students, even if it requires limiting certain speech.

However, it is of note that the results of this study are limited to a sample at Harvard College. As shown in the Class of 2024 By the Numbers Survey, over 70% of first-year students at Harvard identify themselves as "Liberal", with over 30% specifically identifying as "very liberal". Compared to the Heterodox Academy's Campus Expression Survey, where only about 45% of students reported most closely identify with the Democratic Party, this makes the Harvard student body much more liberal than the average US college student, which can add bias in skewing the results to be in favor of more liberal ideals, such as social justice activism. Additionally, the Class of 2024 By the Numbers Survey finds that the Harvard student body is slightly whiter and much more male than the makeup found in the Heterodox Academy.

In the context relating specifically to Harvard University, these results have given insight into how students think the University administration can help bridge the divide between social justice and free speech and make a better campus environment. The Free Speech and Social Justice on Harvard's Campus survey found that majorities did not approve of University Administration's responses to social justice movements or free speech incidents and all respondents agree that University Administration should do more to limit speech that is potentially offensive or controversial. The GENED 1039 - Campus Expression Survey found that majorities want University Administration to disinvite speakers that students oppose, provide safe spaces for students on campus, and provide free speech zones on campus where students are protected to speak freely. The Crimson Freshman Survey found that students urge Administration to

change the names of buildings on campus that are named after offensive individuals. There are specific areas in which students want action and students want more involvement from University Administration in both the areas of free speech and social justice. Students find the current campus culture to be a product of the University's lack of involvement in both areas.

Moving forward, this research can involve other stakeholders in the University, including faculty, staff, administrators, and other community members. These results can be used to help all stakeholders better understand what is driving the current divisive campus culture, and what can be done by all parties to make a campus where all students and affiliates feel safe and supported.

### *Bibliography*

*Chen, K., & Kahn, N. (2020, September 24). Charles Murray to Speak in Gov 50 Lecture Series. The Harvard Crimson. Retrieved from <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/9/24/charles-murray-gov-50/>*

*Dhingra, N. (2019). Student Free Speech and Schools as Public Spaces. Educational Theory, 69(6), 657-673. doi:10.1111/edth.12395*

Lockard, D., Baker, D., & Blissett, R. (2019). Student and Administrative Responses to Student Collective Action on Campus. In 1268782517 937362687 D. L. Morgan & 1268782518 937362687 D. C. F. (Authors), *Student Activism, Politics, and Campus Climate in Higher Education* (pp. 185-199). New York, NY: Routledge.

Stiksma, M. (2020). Understanding the Campus Expression Climate: Fall 2019. *Heterodox Academy*.

Thomas, N. (2019). Activism, Free Speech, and Power. In 1268652885 937282159 D. L. Morgan & 1268652886 937282159 D. C. F. (Authors), *Student*

*Activism, Politics, and Campus Climate in Higher Education* (pp. 21-37). New York, NY: Routledge.

Meet the Class of 2024: By the Numbers. (2020). *The Harvard Crimson*. Retrieved 2021, from <https://features.thecrimson.com/2020/freshman-survey/lifestyle/>

## *Appendix A*

### **Free Speech and Social Justice on Harvard's Campus Survey Questions:**

#### *Free Speech Ideals*

Do you feel negatively or positively toward free speech?

Do you feel negatively or positively toward free speech activism?

Do you feel negatively or positively toward political correctness?

Have you ever participated in any free speech movements/protests?

#### *Free Speech on Campus*

Have you ever participated in any free speech movements/protests on campus?

Do you believe that University Administration should be able to limit certain speech in order to create a positive learning environment for all students?

Do you believe that the University should expose students to all viewpoints, even those that are potentially controversial or offensive?

Do you believe that the University should have "safe spaces" for students to go to for support if they are affected by speech on campus?

Do you feel comfortable expressing your views and opinions on campus?

Do you believe that campus culture prevents some students from expressing their views and opinions on campus?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I believe that professors should be able to invite speakers to campus who have made controversial or offensive comments.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I believe that students should be able to protest speakers who have made controversial or offensive comments.

How do you feel about University Administration's response to recent free speech incidents on campus (e.g. GOV 50 situation)?

### *Social Justice on Campus*

Do you feel negatively or positively toward social justice movements?

Have you ever participated in any social justice movements/protests outside of campus?

Have you participated in any social justice movements/protests on campus?

Do you believe that any part of your identity has influenced your views on social justice movements?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I believe that students have the right to protest on campus.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I believe that the University Administration has the right to intervene in student protests.

How do you feel about the University Administration's response to recent social justice movements?

### *Demographic*

What is your gender identity?

What is your class year?

What is your race?

Do you identify as Hispanic/Latino?

What is your sexual orientation?

With which political ideology do you identify?

How do these groups compare to you politically?

- Harvard Administration
- Harvard Faculty
- Harvard Students

Do you identify as any of the following?

- First Generation/Low Income
- Minority or Member of Underrepresented Group
- Member of a Campus Affinity Group

### *Appendix B*

## **GENED 1039 - Campus Expression Survey Questions:**

### *Comfort Items*

Thinking about discussing a controversial issue in GENED1039. How comfortable or reluctant would you feel about speaking up and giving your views on these topics?

- a controversial POLITICAL issue
- a controversial issue about RACE
- a controversial issue about SEXUAL ORIENTATION
- a controversial issue about SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS/CLASS
- a controversial issue about GENDER

### *Consequence Items*

If you were to speak up and give your views on one of these CONTROVERSIAL issues during a class discussion, how concerned would you be that the following would occur:

- The professor would criticize my views as offensive
- The professor would give me a lower grade because of my views
- The professor would say my views are wrong
- Other students would criticize my views as offensive
- Someone would post critical comments about my views on social media
- Someone would file a complaint claiming that my views violated a campus harassment policy or code of conduct

### *Experience on Campus Treatment Items*

How frequently are you treated badly or unfairly because of your

- Gender
- Political Views
- Race or Ethnicity
- Sexual Orientation
- Socioeconomic status

### *Viewpoint Diversity*

Thinking about STUDENTS at Harvard College, would you say most are politically to the left of you (more liberal) or politically to the right of you (more conservative)?

Thinking about FACULTY at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, would you say most are politically to the left of you (more liberal) or politically to the right of you (more conservative)?

Thinking about ADMINISTRATORS at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, would you say most are politically to the left of you (more liberal) or politically to the right of you (more conservative)?

*Freedom of Expression*

If you had to choose, do you think it is

- a) more important for colleges to create a positive learning environment for all students by prohibiting certain speech or expression of viewpoints that are offensive or biased against certain groups of people

OR

- b) to create an open learning environment, where students are exposed to all types of speech and viewpoints, even if it means allowing speech that is offensive or biased against certain groups of people?

Do you think colleges should or should not be able to establish policies that restrict each of the following types of speech or expression on campus?

Please say whether you favor or oppose each of the following actions taken by colleges

- Providing safe spaces, or areas of campus students can go for support if they feel upset or threatened by things they see or hear.
- Establishing a free speech zone, a designated area of campus in which protesting or distributing literature is permitted, usually with pre-approval
- Providing safe spaces, or areas of campus students can go for support if they feel upset or threatened by things they see or hear.
- Instituting speech codes, or codes of conduct that restrict offensive or biased speech on campus that would be permitted in society more generally.



The climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive

Think about each of the following categories of students at your school. Do you think that students in that category are more comfortable sharing their views in a classroom discussion compared to the average student, less comfortable compared to the average student, or about the same as the average student?

- Left-leaning or progressive students
- Right-leaning or conservative students
- Female students
- Male students
- Transgender students
- Asian students
- Black/African-American students
- Hispanic/Latino students
- White students
- Students born outside of the U.S.

Where do you think most expression and discussion of political or social ideas among students at your college takes place these days?

- Face-to-face on campus in classrooms and public areas (including Zoom events)
- Online through social media
- Not sure

Please say whether you favor or oppose each of the following actions taken by colleges

- Disinviting speakers because some students are opposed to the invitation
- Cancelling planned speeches because of concerns about the possibility of violent protests

How do you feel about the following actions that could be taken by college students?

- Engaging in protest against speakers
- Shouting down speakers or trying to prevent them from talking
- Using violence to stop a speech, protest, or rally

### *Demographics*

What is your student status?

What FAS division are you in? (based on concentration)

How do you describe yourself?

- Female
- Male
- Transgender, transsexual, or gender non-conforming
- Different identity
- Prefer not to say

Do you consider yourself to be:

- Bisexual
- Gay or Lesbian
- Heterosexual or straight
- Different identity
- Prefer not to say

Do you receive financial aid?

How would you best describe your political orientation?

What is your religious preference?

Are you Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

How would you describe yourself?

- Native American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

- White
- Not listed above
- Prefer not to say