

Case Study 2: Controversial Speakers

In April 2016 during the presidential nomination season, the administration of DePaul University erased various messages overnight such as “Trump 2016” and “The Wall, build it”, “Blue lives matter,” “Stand with Israel,” “Stop being a globalist,” and “abortion is murder,” that students had written in chalk around campus. Following this, the republican student group at DePaul University decided to invite [Milo Yiannopoulos](#), a British political commentator and former editor at *Breitbart News*, to speak on campus. The university allowed the visit, but required the student group to pay for additional security. On 24 May 2016, Yiannopoulos's speech was interrupted by students with whistles and students who went onto the stage, making any normal proceedings impossible. The campus security did not interfere with the protests. Yiannopoulos and the event organizers subsequently marched to the office of the university president to protest the obstruction of their event. The College Republicans wanted to invite Yiannopoulos back, but were not allowed. The Vice President of Student Affairs Eugene Zdziarski [wrote to them](#) that, “Mr. Yiannopoulos’ words and behavior contained inflammatory-speech, contributed to a hostile environment and incited similar behavior from the crowd in attendance. In addition, he led an unapproved march through campus that created a potentially dangerous situation.”

Similar situations transpired on other campuses. On January 20, 2017, Yiannopoulos spoke at the University of Washington. A former student supporting the event was involved in the [shooting and wounding](#) of a 34-year-old protestor. On February 1, 2017, Yiannopoulos was scheduled to speak at UC Berkeley. More than 100 faculty members had signed a petition to cancel the event. Mass protests erupted with some violence, partly from outside agitators, and the university [canceled the event](#) based on security concerns. Later efforts to stage a speech didn’t materialize and eventually in September, Yiannopoulos and others came on campus without an invitation and spoke at the outdoor plaza behind police barricades. Hundreds of attendees had to pass through metal detectors to enter the plaza and university-supplied security [was estimated to cost \\$800,000](#).

Yiannopoulos is just one example of speakers who have engendered protests on campuses around the nation. In the last couple of years, [a series of speakers](#) have created controversy on college campuses. In addition to Yiannopoulos, these include Charles Murray, Ben Shapiro, Kathleen Parker, Gavin McInnis, and Richard Spencer.

Readings and video footage:

- Censored at DepPaul University, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvIqJIL2kOMcnYx9jtK4cR66kg3997m6p> (select video 2, 3, and 4 individually, or view all to get a fuller perspective)
- Jessica Chasmar, [Milo Yiannopoulos banned from DePaul University for creating ‘hostile environment’ during May speech](#), Washington Times, July 7, 2016
- Elizabeth King, [The Far Right Has Plans to Recruit Your Campus](#), Pacific Standard, Dec. 1, 2017
- Duke university policy on pickets, protests and demonstrations, <https://studentaffairs.duke.edu/conduct/z-policies/pickets-protests-and-demonstrations>

Questions:

Speakers at Duke

- If Yiannopoulos or one of the other above-mentioned speakers visited the Duke campus, what would you do? Why? Is this the same as what you would prefer to do? Why or why not?
- Would your actions be consistent with Duke policy? Do you agree with the Duke policy?

- Recent research has shown that liberal university professors vastly outnumber conservatives. How does that inform your view about what types of speakers should be invited to Duke? How should speakers be selected?
- In the case of UC Berkeley, faculty members had signed a petition to cancel the event. Should such petitions influence administrative decisions? Should student petitions?

Security

- If a university fears violence, what action should it take? What is necessary evidence for such a fear to be reasonable?
- Vice President of Student Affairs Eugene Zdziarski said that Yiannopoulos' words and behavior "created a potentially dangerous situation." What is more dangerous? Allowing speakers like him or banning them? Who bears the risks or costs in each case?
- Berkeley ended up spending \$800,000 on security. A similarly high price tag was cited at the University of Florida when Richard Spencer visited this fall. Should universities be willing (or compelled) to spend whatever it takes for security for such events? If not, where is the cut off? If so, how should such expenditures be weighed against other needs? Who should bear the costs?

Harms

- In the *Pacific Standard* article, Lecia Brooks, outreach director for the Southern Poverty Law Center, is referenced as arguing that "The presence and organizing efforts of far-right groups and speakers on college campuses can be particularly harmful for marginalized students." What sort of harms does Brooks refer to? How should such harms be weighed against benefits of free speech?
- A student on video #3 says that Yiannopoulos rhetoric is violent: "Racist, sexist bullshit, that is violent." Can rhetoric be violent? If so, is that part of the type of violence universities need to prevent?
- Does free speech extend to hate speech?
- Brooks further argues that "while schools sometimes 'say all the right things' when condemning far-right speakers, universities have typically failed to adequately support marginalized students," and that "as a result, it falls to students to defend their campus from hateful extremists, and from the policies that shield those extremists." This, she argues, means that "Student activists' acts of double defiance sometimes include methods not sanctioned by their schools, meaning students often risk formal sanctions for acts of protest." How does this perspective relate to your position on controversial speakers on college campuses?

On Dialogue

- One of the background videos is about the events leading up to the Yiannopoulos visit, which included the university erasing messages that students had chalked on campus (see above). What is your view of this incident? Should students be allowed to chalk such messages on campus?
- On the video (#3) one student says: "Students organized because we are tired of DePaul saying shit like 'Have a nice conversation with people who write 'Fuck Mexico.''" What is your opinion of this argument?
- Speaking about the DePaul University and other events, Yiannopoulos [has said](#) that the protesters do his work for him, they are his best marketing and that it almost doesn't matter what he says, he just has to show up. Do protests enable or discredit speakers? Can they do both at the same time?