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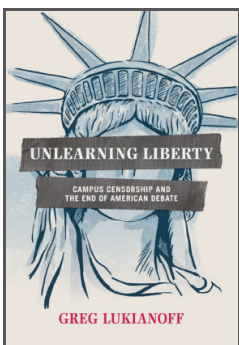
Cataloguing systematic suppression of speech on campus

APRIL 18, 2014 by ALLEN MENDENHALL

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Greg Lukianoff. *Unlearning Liberty: Campus Censorship and the End of American Debate*. Encounter Books. 2014. Paperback. \$10.92. 304 pages.



A diversity of thought and a variety of perspectives are necessary to facilitate competition among ideas. Such competition selectively eliminates the bad from the good, the true from the false, and the practical from the impractical. Opposing viewpoints must enter into this more constructive contest so that the struggle does not move into the arena of physical violence. Thus, toleration of dissenting and controversial opinions is fundamental to peaceful discourse, intellectual progress, and human liberty.

These ideas about freedom of speech and expression have been passed down in different forms from Milton to Mill to Locke and made their way into the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. They are now

under threat in the most unlikely of places: university campuses.

First published in 2012 by Encounter Books, *Unlearning Liberty* was re-released this year in a paperback version with a new afterward by Greg Lukianoff. Lukianoff opens his book with the curious case of Ronald Zaccari, the former president of Valdosta State University who single-handedly facilitated the “administrative withdrawal” of a student who publicly challenged the university’s plans to construct two parking garages on campus. Lukianoff suggests that this case may seem extreme, “but it isn’t all that exceptional.”

Each chapter documents several strange and excessive punitive measures implemented by universities.

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**June 2014**

America's surveillance State has grown far beyond what any of its creators' imagined. In this

For instance, the disciplining of a Jewish student for using a benign Hebrew colloquialism to tell another group of students to pipe down while he tried to study; the student found guilty of “racial harassment” for reading a history book criticizing the Klan, while passersby saw only the cover of the book that displayed a photograph of a Klan rally; the student newspaper threatened with penalties for poking fun at the administration of a prominent business school.

Lukianoff’s long, big-picture catalogue of university abuses might seem like an absurd or purely fictional parade of horrors, but every alarming incident detailed here is all too real. *Unlearning Liberty* is more surprising than enjoyable to read because its message is so disconcerting: In Lukianoff’s words, “the world of higher education today is harming American discourse and increasing polarization.”

This book should leave you outraged and indignant at the illiberal, systemic, systematic, and bewildering suppressions of speech and association taking place on campuses across America. But its target is broader than that. It also criticizes the astronomical costs of higher education, the inflated salaries of university presidents and administrators, the bloated education bureaucracy, and the flagrant disregard by universities for legal processes and protocols that have developed out of centuries of trial-and-error: due process, fair hearings, trial by jury, and the opportunity of the accused to confront his accusers.

Lukianoff is a self-proclaimed Democrat, environmentalist, atheist, activist, lawyer, and the president of the nonprofit Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). His work cuts across simple labels like “conservative” or “liberal” as he champions freedom of speech, individual rights, religious liberty, freedom of conscience, and equal protection under the law. Lukianoff himself is a trailblazing defender of the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights against universities that seek to train students and faculty into silent acceptance of bad policies, frightened acquiescence to abuses of authority, and docile submission to rampant corruption and discrimination. He and FIRE are famous—and, in some circles, infamous—for drawing attention to the arbitrary, selective enforcement of administrative policies against particular groups or individuals for political or retaliatory purposes.

I personally have fought against concerted attempts by faculty and administrators to silence criticisms of bad university policies. As one example, when a certain university ordered one of its students to remove a Ron Paul banner from his dorm room window, although other dorm room windows displayed an array of banners, I wrote an op-ed for the local newspaper challenging the university’s selective enforcement of its policy. As a doctoral candidate at the university, where I had a long family history, I was concerned as much for the university as I was for the student. In response, one renowned faculty member with an endowed chair dashed off the following email to me:

I saw your letter in the Montgomery paper, and it sounds as if you are unaware of the contribution to the deaths and injuries of students because of banners and posters over windows at the university in New Jersey a few years back. As I learned in my own youth, “Ready, Fire, Aim” is not a good mode of conduct, and you are now in a program that, we hope, produces research-oriented people.

The irony here is the implication that I had failed to do my research while this professor had not failed to do hers: I wasn’t criticizing the university policy *per se*, but the application of the policy to only one student, apparently for his political beliefs. As someone who had earned two law degrees and was currently practicing law (even though I was also a doctoral student in her program), I was not demonstrating a “Ready, Fire, Aim” mode of conduct, but she was. Reading *Unlearning Liberty* reminds me that I was never alone.

Universities ought to place a premium on free inquiry and the kind of unfettered intellectual exchange promoted and represented by the republicanism of America’s Founders. Instead, universities have begun to discourage healthy disagreement and have become echo chambers in which certain members seek to enforce a rigid orthodoxy and to promote complacent groupthink. Even worse is the bullying “political correctness” that crushes ideological diversity and the discursive competition necessary for intellectual progress.

Speech codes are a form of censorship. Rather than accomplishing their stated goal of reducing offensive language and behavior, they more often protect the power of administrators and prevent the exposure of embarrassing but true facts about university blunders and the application of stringent legalisms. As universities have brazenly abdicated their traditional role as guardians of communicative liberties and civilized debate, no new institutions have filled the void.

Without some special differentiation among rivaling opinions that are articulated freely within a community of thinkers, ideas and the society based on them cannot advance. It’s time for universities to expand rather than compress the range of discursive options, and to multiply rather than decrease the chances for open dialogue. Doing so would aid in restoring universities to their proper role: searching for knowledge. Lukianoff’s excellent book compiles a list of abuses. Now it’s time for us to do

issue, Wendy McElroy explains that the surveillance State was always more about suppressing dissent than buttressing security. Carl Oberg points out that innumerable nimble innovators have turned the table on the State, while Max Borders wonders if there are enough of them yet to stem the tide. Plus Dan D’Amico discusses the origins and effects of America’s mass incarceration, Sandy Ikeda explains why cities can’t be designed like art, and much, much more.

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## ABOUT ALLEN MENDENHALL

Allen Mendenhall is the author of *Literature and Liberty: Essays in Libertarian Literary Criticism* (Rowman & Littlefield / Lexington Books, 2014). Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](http://AllenMendenhall.com).

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