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The Campus Thought Police: Faux Outrage, Intimidation, and the Threat to Free Speech



Permanent Free Speech Wall in Charlottesville, Virginia. Photograph Source: Daniel Rothamel – [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

There's a long history of faux outrage in reactionary U.S. media regarding the alleged threat of "leftist propaganda" in higher education. It's common to hear laments on the right against "cultural Marxists" in the academy who indoctrinate America's youth and poison their minds. And far-right media have developed a tried-and-true formula for how to stoke mass outrage within their base, centering on active misrepresentations of faculty speech and stoking support for authoritarian efforts to suppress dissent. Sadly, university administrators have often joined in by throwing faculty under the bus to avoid bad PR, or by choosing to remain silent in hopes that these authoritarian attacks will go away. There are plenty of recent examples to draw from, and for those who want to learn more, you can look to cases of faculty who were punished for controversial speech, including former Drexel University Political Science Professor George Ciccariello Maher, Trinity College Sociologist Johnny

[Williams](#), Boston University Sociologist [Saida Grundy](#), and Texas A&M University Philosophy Professor [Tommy Curry](#), among many others.

As Trinity University Political Scientist Isaac Kamola [recounts](#), the controversies above and others like them have something in common:

“Most [of these] attacks are leveled against faculty of color, or those whose research and teaching focuses on issues of race. Most start with a handful of organizations explicitly created to monitor and intimidate college faculty (most prominently *Campus Reform* and the *College Fix*); from there, they travel to sympathetic right-wing websites and news outlets (also created by activist donors committed to undermining public institutions like universities), before arriving at *Fox News*. Most attacks that gain traction involve college administrations sanctioning faculty and condemning their speech.”

The outcome of this train of events is that faculty feel increasingly pressured to self-censor and avoid engaging in critical public discourses related to important political, economic, and social issues.

The effect of these attacks on free speech in the academy is chilling, especially when administrators cannot bring themselves to publicly condemn racist attacks and death threats against faculty who engage in controversial speech. Such is the case with Sirry Alang, a colleague of mine at Lehigh University, who was recently the target of attacks emanating from *Fox News* and other right-wing media and their supporters. Alang [posted](#) on *Twitter* a reaction to the Vice Presidential debate that took aim at Republican Vice President Mike Pence, lamenting: “Pence talks about the Christian faith. The devil, satan, lucifer, the serpent that deceived Eve, the father of all liars, should be taking lessons from Mike Pence.”

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Alang’s characterization of Pence is beside the point. In higher education, professors are supposed to be protected by freedom of speech, and must feel free to speak their minds, no matter how critical the comments, without fear of the backlash that arises from controversial speech. Lehigh University has performed admirably in the past regarding the protection of such speech, as its statement on academic freedom recognizes that “Academic freedom is essential to the unfettered search for truth and its free expression by all members of the University Community...Protection must be given not only for ideas that are widely accepted but also for those that shock or disturb. The widest range of viewpoints should be encouraged, free from institutional orthodoxy and from internal or external coercion.”

Considering the strength of this commitment, it’s surprising to see Lehigh administration shying away from publicly condemning the attacks on Alang, particularly the racist messages, hate mail, and death threats that have been leveled against her. Whatever they think of her beliefs regarding Pence, there’s little reason to think that the university should be bashful about opposing in the strongest possible terms physical threats made against its employees, while reaffirming the university’s commitment to free speech.

In Alang's case, initial [reporting](#) on her *Twitter* comments about Pence was published by *Campus Reform*, then picked up by *Fox News*. *Campus Reform* is notorious for seeking to stoke mass anger against the professoriate, as is apparent in the tagline it includes in its pieces on campus speech controversies claiming that "The radical left will stop at nothing to intimidate conservative students on college campuses," and in its promises to help readers identify ways that "you can stand up to them" by calling for "the federal funding to be pulled" from colleges and universities that "silence conservative views or students." The spuriousness of such claims should be transparently clear as applied to stories like the one *Campus Reform* ran on Alang and other Pence critics, considering that the faculty members cited were speaking in their capacities as public intellectuals and private citizens on *Twitter*, and their comments had nothing to do with teaching in the classroom or student free speech on campus.

The point of *Campus Reform*'s critical reporting is not about demonstrating faculty contempt for free speech. It's about spotlighting critical race scholars who are expressing dissident views about the U.S. political system. This is not the first time the group has targeted Alang, as evidenced by a previous piece they [ran](#) focusing on a *Tweet* she posted that drew attention to racism in the criminal justice system, as related to the shooting death of Breonna Taylor and to police actions that "devalue"[ing] of "Black lives."

Campus Reform's reach would be limited if not for the megaphone conferred on it by *Fox News*. In a [piece](#) titled "College Professors Let Loose Profane Criticism of Pence During VP Debate," *Fox* situated Alang's and other scholars' criticisms of Pence within a larger framework that depicts U.S. academics as systematically biased against the American right. *Fox* [cites](#) a 2016 study from *Economic Journal Watch* that examined voter registration data for professors at dozens of large U.S. universities in the areas of communications, law, psychology, history, and economics, concluding that academics identify as Democratic over Republican at a rate of 11.5 to 1, and with college staffers leaning Democratic over Republican at a nearly 12 to 1 ratio. In case readers can't connect the dots, *Fox* is explicit in its message, citing an [op-ed](#) from the *New York Times* warning that the "ideological imbalance" in higher education "threatens the free and open exchange of ideas, which is precisely what we need to protect in higher education in these politically polarized times."

There are numerous reasons to be suspicious of the *Fox News* narrative that it is merely spotlighting "bias" and seeking to promote intellectual pluralism in higher education. For one, *Fox News* has zero commitment to ideological pluralism, as evidenced by its own content, which embraces pundits like Tucker Carlson, Mark Levin, and Sean Hannity, who have long supported reactionary conspiracy theories and paranoia, and racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic content that dehumanizes people of color, immigrants, and women, while depicting liberals and Democrats as dangerous threats to the stability of the republic. The outlet doesn't come into discussions of free speech and pluralism to protect these cherished

values, but to bury them in a litany of manufactured outrage about radical and un-American professors who indoctrinate youth and should be punished for pushing their politics onto impressionable youngsters.

Outside of their disingenuous “let’s explore all sides” faux pluralism, there is reason to be concerned that the sort of reporting that targets scholars like Sirry Alang and others, and the muted or negative responses to it from college administration, is enabling a rising culture of extremism on the American right, which manifests itself increasingly in violence or threats of violence against perceived political enemies. For those who would offer false balance to this discussion by offering claims that “both sides” engage in such extremism, I would point out that extremist threats of violence are much more of a problem on the American right than on the left.

My examination of one 2017 *Pew Research Center*’s national survey reveals that Republican Americans and self-identified conservatives are roughly twice as likely to agree that “targeting and killing civilians” can “sometimes” or “often be justified in order to further a political, social, or religious cause,” compared to saying that such attacks can “rarely” or “never be justified” [1]. Roughly 20 percent of Republicans and conservatives embrace this authoritarian view, compared to about one in ten liberals and Democrats.

When professors receive death threats from right-wing readers of venues like *Campus Reform* and *Fox News*, it is hard to discount *Pew*’s findings as hot air. Rather, these attacks have real world consequences, threatening to suppress dissent via intimidation, coercion, and the threat of terrorist violence.

One final reason to reject the reactionary attack on academia is the wholesale lack of evidence that the private party affiliations of professors or staffers are creating a hostile learning environment for students. I’ve documented at length in previous statistical [research](#), drawing on a large number of national polling questions on Americans’ political, economic, and social attitudes, how there is little reason to worry that obtaining a college degree will be associated with systematically adopting liberal or left-wing attitudes. Surveying Americans’ opinions on more than 160 political questions that can be broken down based on respondents taking liberal and conservative positions, I find that the relationship between higher levels of formal education and holding liberal-left political attitudes is weak to nonexistent, after controlling for other factors, including respondents’ age, income, gender, race, political party affiliation, and ideology.

Put another way, the evidence above suggests that there’s little evidence of pervasive ideological indoctrination going on with American youth in collegiate settings. This will hardly be surprising for faculty across America reading this. The vast majority of faculty I know, while moderate to liberal in their personal politics, go out of their way to avoid using their classrooms as a soapbox for propagandizing their students and trafficking in one-sided political or ideological messages. Most professors are conscientious in their efforts to mute

their own political voices, at times to avoid charges of “bias,” and because they seek to promote a learning environment conducive to exploring a variety of viewpoints – in the name of promoting critical thinking and an open discussion of ideas.

Sadly, universities have often been coerced by the right-wing campus outrage industry, and by polemical attacks on the academy from those who have no interest in seeking pluralism in political discourse, but who are at the forefront of authoritarian efforts to silence critical and progressive views. I am proud of the Faculty Senate at Lehigh University for taking a stand against the reactionary attacks on my colleague, Sirry Alang, as seen in the statement they issued against “the recent onslaught of death threats, hate messages, and other harassing attacks” on Alang, and calling on the university to issue “a public statement speaking out against acts of racism, death threats, and harassment Prof. Alang is experiencing.” At a time when the Black Lives Matter movement has elevated a discussion of structural racism to the top of public discourse, colleges and universities across the country have an ethical responsibility to publicly stand against racism and authoritarianism, as directed against people of color, and particularly against faculty engaging in critical free speech.

I would encourage all faculty and students reading this to consider pressuring administrators at your colleges and universities to take up the proposals offered by Lehigh’s Faculty Senate, which calls upon the university to commit to the following:

- *Affirm in public communications that “students, faculty, and staff have the right to exercise their First Amendment rights to express opinions.”

- * “Denounce the use of death threats and hate speech against” “faculty, staff, and students.”

- * “Express” to the “campus community that any such threats are taken seriously, and formal police reporting and investigative paths are being pursued.”

Providing a safe environment for those affiliated with our colleges and universities to openly explore and express their views should be the highest priority for those who want to ensure that free speech is valued and protected in these polarized and troubling times. The voices of a small minority of racists and authoritarians must not be allowed to stifle critical exploration and free thinking, lest the mission of American universities is fundamentally endangered.

Notes.

[1] Pew Research Center, “[National Survey: February 28-March 12, 2017](#),” *Pew Research Center*.

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