

## Expression and Engagement During COVID-19

COVID-19 has impacted every aspect of our lives. Its effect on higher education has been profound: campuses have been emptied, instruction has moved online and diverse stakeholders are having to find new ways to express their viewpoints, interact with peers and faculty as well as stay connected to their communities.

For this installment of Speech Spotlight we invited our current [class of Fellows](#) and a number of our [VOICE \(Valuing Open and Inclusive Communication and Engagement\) award recipients](#) to share their insights and opinions about challenging issues during this unprecedented time.

You can read every issue of our Speech Spotlight series here. Let us know what topics interest you by emailing us at [freespeechcenter@uci.edu](mailto:freespeechcenter@uci.edu).



### **Tilling the Ground for the Future: Resilience during COVID-19**

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The powering down of society due to an invisible, microscopic threat has been a scary and unnerving experience for so many in recent weeks. On college campuses, the impacts of the shut down are unprecedented, as students, staff and faculty alike adjust to new systems for education and engagement, all while grieving many complex and devastating effects. From a biological perspective, our fight-flight-freeze alarm system is on hyper alert as we aggressively assess what we require to thrive.

The scrambling of our daily rhythms coupled with the real danger of viral illness has evoked many responses, starting with visceral discomfort, emotional swings, worry, and fear for what comes next. This, on top of numerous efforts to adapt, secure basic needs, develop new routines and stay connected has added stress and fatigue to an already anxious and politically polarized population.

For many, living through COVID-19 activates a biological resilience toward finding a new normal. This mechanism asks us to actively adapt and surrender to what is beyond our control, find flexibility in daily operations and agency within uncertainty. There is a tentative curiosity for what comes next as we forge meaningful connections and find gratitude in small moments. The tenderness and vulnerability of this time reminds us of our value for life, our interdependence and the power of allyship, collaboration, and social systems.

Like tilling the soil for aeration, COVID-19 has loosened our roots and invited in both emptiness and opportunity. It has the potential to soften our listening ear and open up spaces for authentic expression, understanding, and innovation. As we arrive at the new rhythm of tomorrow, we can first slow down together, in the uncertainty, to breathe, envision, and take action toward a future that honors our most precious values for life and freedom.



## **COVID-19 Creates a Differently-Unfair System**

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Many have written that the rapid switch to online education deepens inequities in education. Students who are caring for younger siblings, have limited access to broadband and computers, who have privacy concerns, or live in distant time zones face higher hurdles than many of their peers. As someone who focuses on inclusive pedagogy and universal design for learning, I am compelled to say that the move to online isn't about a fair system becoming unfair—what we have now is differently unfair.

For example: students who work to meet their expected family contribution have less time to study than those who are not financing their education. But while universities have policies to accommodate student athletes who miss class due to practices or games, many lack similar protections for students who work. Online learning is differently unfair- not uniquely unfair.

Economic insecurity doesn't only affect academic opportunities; it can also chill free expression. In the course of our research into self-censorship and self-editing, my fellowship partner and I encountered many students who felt they could not speak out about pressing political issues for fear that their campus work supervisors would disapprove or their financial aid would be at risk. Free speech, as it turns out, isn't free.

Secondly, many of the systems we're using now- including video conferencing- would benefit students with disabilities and chronic illness for whom in-person instruction is not always accessible. Disabled self-advocates have expressed frustration that schools have refused to offer these alternatives until abled students needed them. If universities (and others) had paid more attention to disabled self-advocates' voices, we would all be more experienced and prepared for this moment. Free speech and expression are hollow liberties if we do not listen, and COVID-19 has shown how poorly we have listened to self-advocates about common-sense accessibility fixes.

So my two take-aways from the COVID-19 era to date are (1) we need to address the way economic status affects the educational experience even when we're all in the room together; and (2) we should keep trying to make classes accessible to those who can't be in the room with us, recognize that efforts to make our classes more accessible will ultimately benefit everyone, and take extra care to listen when we're told that education is inaccessible.



## COVID-19 and Intellectual Freedom

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The challenges posed by COVID-19 include threats to intellectual freedom. At Liberty University, President Jerry Falwell Jr. is [trying to make reporting about COVID-19 a crime](#) by pursuing criminal charges of trespassing against New York Times and ProPublica reporters who came on campus to report about his controversial decision to reopen the campus residence halls after spring break.

And as colleges moved instruction online, Turning Point USA head Charlie Kirk [tweeted](#) on March 22 to students, “Please share any and ALL videos of blatant indoctrination” and declared, “Now is the time to document & expose the radicalism that has been infecting our schools.” Kirk’s [call for spying on faculty](#) was widely denounced by [PEN America](#), the [AAUP](#) and even the [Charles Koch Foundation](#).

At a time when the world is under lockdown and vast numbers of people are dying, freedom of expression can seem like a trivial issue. But it’s important to note that one reason why Covid-19 spread so widely around the world (and people were so slow to recognize the danger) was because the totalitarian government of China suppressed information.

Dr. Li Wenliang, the ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital who warned colleagues about the dangers of COVID-19 (and later died from it), [was detained by police for “spreading false rumors” and forced to sign a confession](#) that he “seriously disrupted social order.” Chinese media reporting on the pandemic were [repeatedly censored](#) by Chinese authorities. US intelligence agencies have concluded that the [Chinese government concealed the danger](#) of the deadly pandemic.

Even in the United States today, hospitals are routinely censoring health care workers who publicly expose the lack of protective equipment. On March 28, New York University’s Grossman School of Medicine and NYU Langone Health [ordered](#) faculty doctors [not to talk to any reporters](#) about COVID-19 without express approval from the Office of Communications and Marketing. Northwestern Memorial Hospital [fired a nurse](#) on March 19 after she emailed 50 of her colleagues to warn them that N95 masks were “safer and more effective” than the masks provided by the hospital. On March 27, dozens of concerned organizations [wrote a public letter](#) denouncing hospitals that “muzzle health care professionals.”

In a moment of crisis, censorship harms all of us.



## **The Virtual Campus Depends on Corporate Tech**

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Higher education suffers when tech companies pursue profit at the expense of public interest.

COVID-19 has driven education online, exposing an inexcusable “[homework gap](#).” Away from campus, many students are on the wrong side of America’s [deep digital divide](#). [Congress must act to ensure universal access that the free market has failed to provide](#).

But access is just part of the problem. Virtual classrooms now depend on platforms whose priority is to maximize shareholder value—not to provide a safe environment for learning. Most [famously egregious](#) is the Zoom videoconferencing service. Zoom’s [appalling lack of security](#) has enabled hackers to [join meetings uninvited](#), post [hate speech](#), and expose sensitive private discussions. The San Jose-based company’s CEO has pledged to fix the problems, but strong U.S. privacy law could have prevented them in the first place. Multiple bills and proposals have been floating around Capitol Hill for the past year, but progress [has stalled](#).

Activism and civic engagement are now also totally dependent on commercial platforms. For example, student-run mutual aid pages are proliferating on Facebook. Facebook builds profiles of users based on their activity on the platform and shares them with advertisers, who can target people according to very specific selected traits. Targeted content [may include](#) political messages, or even false or misleading information. What’s more, as we turn to Facebook and other social media to share information, we lack full control over what content from which people in our network is displayed to us in our “news feed” when we log on. Facebook [uses content-shaping algorithms](#) to amplify content most likely to provoke the strongest reaction, keeping people on the site for longer, which in turn maximizes advertising revenue. The law could curb such practices, and require much greater transparency.

Virtual campuses do not have to be cramped fun-houses full of mirrors and hidden traps. We can demand better.



## **Zoombombing is a New Threat to Free Speech, but Builds on Years of Online Harassment**

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Disruptions. Interruptions. Postponed tests. A deluge of racist, sexist, or pornographic content.

These are the hallmarks of so-called 'Zoombombing,' which has swept across the landscape of virtual higher education in recent weeks. Perpetrators have interrupted routine academic engagements, including classes, conferences, and meetings, by sharing screens with offensive content, swarming chat windows, and flooding audio channels with insults. Some have canceled online sessions in response, while others have moved to close off open discussions to head off the attacks.

Zoombombing has its antecedent in abusive online tactics that have metastasized in recent years, with individuals subjected to sexual harassment, doxxing, or having their emails flooded with gruesome imagery and threats. There can be little denying that professors, administrators, and students have been favorite targets for such invective. Women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community have been targeted disproportionately.

But at many universities, online harassment has largely been perceived as an attack against individuals, rather than an attack against the academy or the values it represents. As a result, this problem has not been met with the same urgency or outcry as other free speech issues in higher education, like heckling of invited speakers, or professors' academic freedom. Although many people have felt intimidated, threatened -- or silenced -- because of online abuse, we have yet to see a broad mobilization in response, or the development of standardized policies, protocols, or forms of support.

In higher education, our commitment to liberal, democratic values means standing up for the rights of all to speak without fear of harassment or retribution. It necessitates taking seriously any threats that impair the free flow of discourse. Every meeting cancelled or class postponed risks undermining the equal rights of all to receive, share, and impart information. If recent trends persist, an institution committed to diversity risks having silenced the voices from historically marginalized communities that it has long sought to include.

Because the virtual shift has constrained our channels for communication, it has made more people susceptible to these attacks, and made protecting these channels more urgent. But growing recognition of this problem should not be squandered. If one unintended effect of Zoombombing is better support for victims, or a robust effort to amplify these silenced voices, then this will be a campaign of hate and abuse that ultimately backfires. Let's hope higher education is up to the task.



## **Kind and Strong Speech for Democracy Now**

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Democracy in a time of a pandemic calls on us to be different, to speak differently, and to engage differently in the civic arena. As I talk with my colleagues and students who are no longer on campus, but confined to their homes, we discuss how the personal and political are colliding in ways that impact our traditional modes of democratic engagement. We strive to be kind and more compassionate than ever as the pandemic surfaces the fact of life that we never know what tomorrow may bring. At the same time, much of the public discourse has narrowed itself to dealing with fearful fates of lost jobs, social distancing, limited supplies, and even death.

We try to focus on the bright spots that emerge in organizing efforts to help one another cope. I was particularly proud of a [NC A&T](#) student who collected signatures to a list of “grievances” to send to our campus and system governing bodies. The student and supporters had serious questions about grades, work products, public safety, and tuition and fees that had not yet been addressed. While campus leaders were struggling to respond to the crisis, and did so mostly with grace, the students struggled too, to offer a collective voice sounding their concerns.

The result was a win for free speech, collective action, and democratic engagement that helped shape subsequent campus decisions. That is, students working together influenced how campus leaders did their work in uncharted territory. Everyone is being asked to make decisions absent complete knowledge of what is yet to come. The more we can use our voices and engage with one another, the more likely we will emerge from this crisis better able to attend to the consequences of what we’re living through at the moment.



## COVID-19's Civic Engagement Lesson

Jonathan Schwartz

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Founder, Every Vote Counts

Though it may not be on the front of our minds at this moment, now is a critical time for civic engagement work on campus. The 2020 Census is well under way and we are gearing up for one of the most contentious election cycles our country has ever seen. The work we do now in preparing students both to cast their vote and to engage civilly and productively with one another is vital.

As I mentioned in my [remarks at this year's #SpeechMatters conference](#), I fear that a lifetime of democratic dysfunction has caused my generation to lose faith in the democratic process as a mechanism for change. Today, we're seeing that young people aren't voting not just because it's too difficult (which it still is), but because they don't believe their vote, or their right to vote, makes a difference.

The coronavirus pandemic illuminates a different path. As we leave our campuses, upend our lives, and distance ourselves from one another, we are reminded that each of our actions matters. Each of us cannot flatten the curve alone, but our individual participation in this collective effort lends legitimacy to the system we know is our best hope to get us through these difficult times.

Democracy is no different. When we fill out the Census in the coming months, we recognize that our participation alone will not guarantee funding for an entire public school or fire department, but we still participate. And when we vote in November, we understand that our vote alone will not decide an election, but we vote anyway. Because that is our duty as caretakers of American democracy.

When this pandemic is over, we will contemplate the many lessons of COVID-19 as we seek to make our society more resilient. One lesson that I hope colleges and universities - students, faculty, and administrators alike - will take seriously is that our government, our democracy, and our participation matters.



## **Staying Connected While Apart: Supporting Dialogue and Civic Engagement in a Virtual World**

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COVID-19 has upended the status quo in unprecedented ways. Universities are navigating this new world by shifting the entire college experience online. While there has been a growing and important discussion of inequalities in students' ability and access to online courses, providing education is just one aspect of the University's role as a societal actor today.

Facilitating the civic and democratic participation of students is another, relatively less discussed, role. This effort sits at the heart of our mission at the [UC Santa Barbara Blum Center on Poverty, Inequality, and Democracy](#). Our daily work involves meeting with partners to collaborate on events, gathering together as a community to debate a critical social issue, and connecting students with hands-on community service.

**But what does speech, dialogue, and civic engagement look like in a solely virtual world?** The Blum Center believes in helping students stay informed citizens so they can meaningfully choose how to engage in their communities. We are therefore synthesizing research on the differential impacts of the COVID-19 crisis across communities both nationally and locally. Second and related, we will highlight concrete avenues to virtually address these inequalities. This might involve showcasing student voices on the unique impacts of COVID-19 on youth, or highlighting how youth are leading movements to address inequalities related to COVID and broader issues of justice and equity, through our social media platforms and our student-led podcast, Power to the People.

From the emergence of [Zoomers to Boomers](#), to [Sunrise School](#) led by the Sunrise Movement, and [Strike University](#) created by UC graduate students advocating for a cost of living adjustment (COLA) - youth led movements are innovating and/or pivoting their efforts in real time to virtually inform and engage youth in social change. Exploring how community organizing and democratic participation is shifting in tactics, goals and impacts in a virtual world, examining how inclusive these transitions have been, as well as how our Center can best support students in their online civic engagement, will be key questions we explore through the coming weeks and months. As Warsan Ali, a Blum Student Assistant and co-host of our student-led podcast, underlines - "our communities are not dissolving, but evolving with the crisis. The Blum Center will continue to be a space for students to learn from, and with, each other through virtual programming — encouraging social but not societal distancing."





## **No Office, No Problem: How College Journalists Are Covering COVID-19**

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[2019-2020 VOICE Award Recipients](#); Project: Daily Nexus “Now We’re Talkin’” Podcast

Due to the unprecedented events of the last few weeks, journalism has never felt more urgent or ubiquitous. As a campus newspaper, our job is to keep our community informed on the latest news and serve as a platform for student voices. How do we remain true to our mission when a global pandemic is making it impossible to function normally?

Like most college papers, the Daily Nexus publishes a weekly print edition as well as an online edition. Because of the virus, our Editor-in-Chief chose to suspend print indefinitely and move all operations onto our website. Our editorial staff has adapted to these new circumstances by making use of technology and social media. For example, in place of Spring Orientation, our social media team conducted a Reddit AMA forum. Our section, Opinion, is holding weekly meetings through Zoom so we can have live interactions with our writing staff.

In the midst of a crisis, the Opinion section is drawing increased submissions. Shortly after classes were suspended, we reached out to UCSB students via social media and received a flurry of op-ed articles concerning the impact of the virus. Racism towards Asian students was a prominent issue on campus in the weeks leading up to the quarantine. In response, we published a [series of short essays](#) on this subject, mainly written by international students from China.

COVID-19 has certainly changed our day-to-day lives, but we are adapting. We are all learning ways to retain some semblance of normalcy and our media needs to reflect that. The ideas students cared about before the virus have not disappeared; they still demand attention. We are committed to publishing diverse opinions that cover more than just the pandemic, while acknowledging that the outbreak is at the forefront of everyone’s minds.



## **Civic Engagement Is Not Under Quarantine**

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[2019-2020 VOICE Award Recipient](#); Project: BridgeUSA

Even though we are under quarantine, civic engagement should not be. In order to rebuild, we need to be ready by planning for the future and keeping up with usual activities. For BridgeUSA, this means moving planned events online and creating new ones as well. We are going to have Congressional representatives speak to us on Zoom calls, have moderated discussions about salient issues online, and keep in touch as a community to support each other. When physical isolation is necessary, so are social connections.

As an organization in higher education, it is our duty to keep moving and make the world a better place. What BridgeUSA promotes with constructive discourse and democratic participation is just that. We are not physically together face to face, but we are fortunate to have the tools and technology that allow us to stay connected in a crisis and, therefore, to keep making a difference across the world.

It is essential that we continue to increase local, state, and national political participation. This is a chance for widespread change and dialogue, just through the share of a link. For instance, some candidates for office are holding discussions and answering questions online, creating podcasts and YouTube channels, as well as regularly updating social media accounts. These are all great ways to get to know these candidates and for them to get to know their constituents.

Other ways to become civically involved including filling out the Census, supporting small businesses and checking in with friends and neighbors.



## **UC Graduate Students Shift to a Digital Picket-line in Demanding a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA)**

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Graduate Student Teaching Assistants at the University of California, Santa Cruz began their “Wildcat Strike,” demanding a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA), in September 2019. Within months the COLA movement spread to the entire UC System. There has been variation in timeline and tactics across the 10 campuses with many COLA organizers engaging in a full teaching strike, others withholding grades, and some conducting educational campaigns to build support without striking.

Winter Quarter saw activists on most of the campuses engaging in direct action such as sit-ins in the Chancellor’s Office, rallies, marches, teach-ins, blocking streets to stop the flow of traffic, and obstructing the entrances to administrative buildings. At my own campus, UC Santa Barbara, more than 2,500 protestors marched to the gate that marks the entrance to our campus, demonstrating that they had the people power to block the highway to our campus.

Days later, our campus and other UCs began switching to remote learning because of the Coronavirus. COLA activists were suddenly deprived of the visibility of people power in a physical form, and the targets for protest on campuses were no longer relevant. Out of necessity, COLA activists switched to what they call a “Digital Picket Line,” which is a remote, online strike. Instead of meeting in-person, activists hold their meetings via Zoom, and many supporting documents are collectively created and shared via Google Docs. A number of graduate student teaching assistants who are still striking have elected to hold their sessions online but use those meetings to educate their students about COLA rather than deliver course content. Supporters are encouraged to send mass emails and phone calls to administrators on particular days in order to flood their inboxes and voicemails with demands for a COLA.

Additionally, Strike University is a digital initiative created by COLA organizers across the UC system that aims to provide public education that is free and accessible for everyone. The initiative includes strike office hours, classes on organizing, mutual aid activism, phone bank training, a reading group and watch parties. One of the strengths of the COLA movement has always been organizers’ abilities to disseminate information and increase engagement through the utilization of social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. That foundation has enabled the movement to continue in the digital realm.