

Vincent Munoz ([00:03](#)):

I think what we need to do is explain how our principles of free speech, free inquiry will help serve the cause of justice.

Betty Friedan ([00:12](#)):

The First Amendment, the constitutional freedom of speech and freedom of conscience, that is the bulwark of our democracy.

Bettina Aptheker ([00:22](#)):

There was a passion in what was being said, affirming what people considered a sacred, constitutional right, freedom of speech and freedom of association.

Michelle Deutchman ([00:35](#)):

From the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, this is SpeechMatters, a podcast about expression, engagement, and democratic learning in higher education. I'm Michelle Deutchman, the Center's executive director, and your host. Welcome to episode five. Today, we'll be exploring the issue of student self-censorship at colleges and universities. But first, Class Notes: a look at what's making headlines.

Michelle Deutchman ([01:01](#)):

As graduation caps are flung in the air and this academic year wraps up, free speech issues still abound. At the Supreme Court, the justices gave a narrow win to the tech industry, when five justices voted to temporarily block a Texas law that bars social media platforms from removing posts based on the views they express. The coverage of the case focused less on the ruling and more on the slim majority. The dissenting justices made it clear that they are open to reconsidering how the First Amendment should or should not apply to social media.

Michelle Deutchman ([01:33](#)):

Ilya Shapiro, the former Vice President of the Cato Institute, who was put on administrative leave from Georgetown Law following his tweets regarding who was, and was not, best suited to be Biden's pick for Breyer's spot on the Supreme Court, was reinstated as a senior lecturer and executive director for the Georgetown Center for the Constitution, after the university concluded its investigation. Days after his reinstatement, Shapiro announced his resignation, claiming that Georgetown's treatment of him showcased an "implicit repeal of Georgetown's Speech and Expression Policy." This conflict highlights, yet again, the continuing struggle to create campus climates that are inclusive, equitable, and safeguard robust expression.

Michelle Deutchman ([02:15](#)):

Pronouns took center stage when Shawnee State University announced a \$400,000 settlement with professor Nick Meriwether. In 2018, the university punished Meriwether for refusing to refer to a transgender student by her preferred pronouns. He in turn sued the university. The Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in his favor, holding that Shawnee State violated Meriwether's free speech rights when they disciplined him.

Michelle Deutchman ([02:42](#)):

In the meantime, US Education Secretary Cardona has a different perspective. He believes students have the right to be called by the pronouns that match their gender identity. This issue may come to a head when Cardona's new proposed rule for Title IX, the federal education law that prohibits sex-based discrimination, is made public this month. It is expected that the new rule will include protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity, for the first time.

Michelle Deutchman ([03:10](#)):

Finally, on the tenure front, the American Association of University Professors issued a report last month, finding that 54% of institutions said they had replaced tenure lines with contingent appointments in the past five years. Without tenure, there is less job security, which in turn can have a chilling effect on faculty's willingness to discuss or research hot topics that may place them in the spotlight. This concept of reticence to speak is at the heart of today's topic.

Michelle Deutchman ([03:43](#)):

We are now going to dive into an issue that we've alluded to on earlier episodes, and that's self-censorship in college and university classrooms. Over the last few years, we've been bombarded with survey data and anecdotes of students who say they curb their self-expression for fear of running afoul of dominant ideologies on campus. These claims are then used by some to buoy the narrative that there's a free expression crisis on campus, which in turn, has led lawmakers to pass legislation that is intended to strengthen expression, but often undermines academic freedom and university autonomy.

Michelle Deutchman ([04:17](#)):

It's a domino effect of sorts. To help us understand this phenomenon, we are lucky enough to have two guests, both of whom have conducted research on the issue of self-censorship. For this episode, we're going to be wonky: we're going to look behind eye-catching headlines and get into the data. How is it collected? What does it mean? How is it used? And ultimately, we're going to address the question of how to ensure that colleges and universities are and remain spaces that welcome different perspectives, and allow students to learn and grow as thinkers and citizens.

Michelle Deutchman ([04:48](#)):

Sean Stevens is Senior Research Fellow, Polling & Analytics at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Education, also known as FIRE. Prior to that, he served as a research fellow at Heterodox Academy. Sean has a PhD in social psychology from Rutgers University. So, Sean, welcome.

Sean Stevens ([05:06](#)):

Thank you. Happy to be here.

Michelle Deutchman ([05:08](#)):

Why don't you kick it off by telling us how you became interested in studying this issue, and maybe share an overview of your work at FIRE.

Sean Stevens ([05:17](#)):

My post-doctoral work, actually, before starting at Heterodox Academy, was broadly on just kind of scientific methodologies, best practices, but it grew out of an interest in how, what the researcher brings to the table, can influence the research process. And this kind of ultimately then I think morphed

into a more specific focus on how it could play out both in the research process, but in the classroom, on campuses, and my work at Heterodox Academy. And with the idea that in settings where there's a clear majority opinion, it becomes harder to stake out viewpoints that aren't in line with that majority opinion. And there's ramifications of this for both teaching and research. That's broadly how I got interested in it.

Michelle Deutchman ([06:12](#)):

No, I like that background. And can you tell us a little bit about the work that you've been doing at FIRE and in particular in your free speech survey?

Sean Stevens ([06:20](#)):

Sure. So the work at FIRE kind of grew out of work I did do at Heterodox Academy, where I helped develop their campus expression survey. And then FIRE and Heterodox Academy, due to two fairly prominent people associated with each organization who co-authored a book together, have a pretty good working relationship. And so I was actually working with some people at FIRE on this kind of broad idea of developing a gold standard of questions for assessing the culture of free expression on a college campus. And it kind of then, ultimately, made more sense for me to continue my work on that at FIRE. So that's how I came to work there.

Michelle Deutchman ([07:04](#)):

Great. Thank you. Now we're going to turn to Beth Niehaus, who's an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. During the 2020-21 year, she was a Fellow at the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, where she conducted a research study exploring how college students make decisions about whether or not to share their own perspectives in the classroom. I am now thrilled to share that this coming year, Beth will be continuing her research as a Senior Fellow at the Center.

Michelle Deutchman ([07:33](#)):

Beth, what drew you to want to spend a year examining this idea of "self-censorship or just being nice"?

Beth Niehaus ([07:40](#)):

Thanks, Michelle. So my inspiration for the project actually came from surveys like Sean has done at Heterodox and FIRE and other similar surveys that at least get translated in media reports as finding rampant self-censorship on college campuses. And I actually teach courses on free speech and campus climate in higher ed, so I've read through the reports and looked at the survey instruments that are being used as part of teaching those courses. And although I find them really interesting, when I read over the questions that are being asked in these surveys, they just don't seem to say what folks think they say.

Beth Niehaus ([08:16](#)):

And just in general, I found myself always coming away with more questions than answers. What I was curious about, actually, were the nevers. Students who answer these questions about how often they hold back opinions in class, because they're concerned about how other people might respond, and they actually say that they never do this. And I just always wondered, how is that even possible? Because when I read over these questions, I say, "Of course, I do that all the time." We all do that all the time,

because we live in a society with other people. And we care in both good and bad ways what other people think. And we care about other people's feelings. I mean, unless you're a total jerk, you probably don't walk around knowingly and intentionally trying to upset other people.

Beth Niehaus ([08:57](#)):

So I was really curious, what are students actually thinking about when they respond to these survey questions? So being fortunate enough to have a job that allows me to ask and answer interesting questions, and then being even more fortunate to get the support of the UC Center through the Fellows program, I decided to actually dig into this in ways that surveys just can't, by talking in-depth with students about how they're thinking about and navigating challenging speech issues, particularly in college classrooms.

Beth Niehaus ([09:25](#)):

So I did, as a foundation, develop a short survey that has some questions, demographics, has a version of this question that shows up on a lot of these free speech surveys about how often students hold back their opinion in class. And then I get into some other questions and scenarios about how students are making judgments about other students' potentially controversial classroom speech.

Beth Niehaus ([09:48](#)):

And that survey data is interesting. But the more interesting part is that I used that as a foundation for these in-depth interviews that I wanted to have with students. Because I had this survey data, I was able to intentionally select participants who reflect a diversity of political identifications, views on classroom speech, and responses to that question about how often they hold back their opinion in class. And I used that, first, for my initial report for the fellowship, which was based on 16 white students at a single institution. And then I've expanded that to a few additional institutions, and have included students of color in the interviews as well, to expand my understanding of this even further.

Michelle Deutchman ([10:31](#)):

Thank you so much. So a small sample size, but you're going to, I hope, share with us in a couple minutes, what you found. I'm realizing that maybe we need to do a tiny bit of level setting before we dive into the data, which is to talk about, how we're actually defining what the problem is. And I'm curious, maybe Sean, you can start, what do each of you mean when you say self-censorship? And is it possible that others define this word differently?

Sean Stevens ([10:59](#)):

Sure, and the answer to the second question is, yes, of course, that's possible. I'm happy to elaborate further on that after we hear Beth's definition as well. The definition I adopt, and so this would be FIRE's definition of how we approach this, comes from a communication literature. It's fairly narrow. It's the withholding of one's opinion around an audience perceived to disagree with that opinion. It's grounded in spiral silence theory. So the idea is that people are withholding this opinion, because they're concerned about negative reactions that could result in them being marginalized or ostracized socially.

Sean Stevens ([11:38](#)):

So one hypothesis that generates from this is the experience or the pressure that one might feel the self-censor should be stronger when their view is in the minority. So by this definition, I wouldn't include

things like staying silent. This isn't Beth that I'm quoting, but I'm quoting a different person who has suggested this kind of broader definition. So I wouldn't include staying silent in large lecture classes where discussions aren't encouraged, giving others a chance to speak or waiting until they're sure of their own facts or opinions before strongly stating them as self-censorship.

Michelle Deutchman ([12:20](#)):

Okay. That's helpful. And let me give Beth a chance to say what her definition of self-censorship are, and we'll see how close the two of you are. I imagine there's going to be some overlap.

Beth Niehaus ([12:29](#)):

Yes, I think, Michelle, you asked if people define the word differently, and I think a lot of people mean a lot of different things when they use the term self-censorship. And there's certainly the more academic definition that Sean provided, and I think that is a helpful definition. When I dig into the academic literature on this, I find that there's not one widely agreed upon definition.

Beth Niehaus ([12:55](#)):

There's some common elements around someone refraining from expressing something when there's no formal external censorship. So there's no law or rule that a person can't express what they would otherwise express. There are often these elements of, like Sean was saying, a person's viewpoint being in the minority and fearing some sort of social sanction. Some folks put in other criteria that there need to be, say, some sort of power dynamic or what I find to be a very vague criteria that the expression is something that should be expressed for some reason.

Beth Niehaus ([13:35](#)):

I think in practical senses though, all of these academic definitions are interesting and helpful in an academic sense, but in the real world, I think, when we're applying the term self-censorship to the higher education context, it's really quite ill-defined. People make a lot of assumptions about what self-censorship means. And some of them are talking about self-censorship in exactly the way that Sean was talking about. But I think more often the implication is much broader. That it's about any sort of decision that students make to not speak up for whatever reason. I don't think that's a particularly helpful definition. But because the term self-censorship is so ill-defined in practice, I actually will throw in that, I prefer the term self-editing that Carlos Cortez has proposed, to capture this wide array of decisions that individuals make about what, when, and how to communicate particular ideas.

Beth Niehaus ([14:37](#)):

Unfortunately, that terminology hasn't really taken off. So we're left with this term self-censorship that gets used in so many different ways. I try not to use the term self-censorship when I can avoid it, but when I am using it, I'm usually using it in response to something. So I'm using it in whatever way the thing I'm responding to, or the person I'm responding to, is using it. So that might not be the most helpful definition of self-censorship, but because I think it's such a poorly defined concept in practice, I think that's what we're left with.

Michelle Deutchman ([15:11](#)):

Well, I think it's really interesting to hear from both of you, because it seems like it might be hard to be comparing apples to apples when different folks, both in the research arena and then in the applied

area, have different definitions. Sean, did you want to just comment on anything Beth said, or on the idea of self-editing, before we move on to talk about some of the findings from the FIRE study?

Sean Stevens ([15:34](#)):

Honestly, it's like, the way we're discussing this is how the process of science and especially social science works or ideally works. How different people choose to operationalize a variable or a construct, meaning like how we define it, and what we're actually trying to measure, is really interesting and also important. And when you're doing work like this, in terms of scientific purpose or goal of it, you're trying to start continue a conversation, because no one way of approaching investigating an important phenomenon or construct is the way. And different ways can be very informative. And so that's kind of the beauty of all this is you put together these different ways of measuring phenomenon and even different ways of defining them.

Sean Stevens ([16:27](#)):

And I think we come to a better understanding, or hopefully come to a better understanding of what's actually going on with something like self-censorship. And we also, in the process of doing that, identify the better ways of identifying when it's actually occurred. And so I think that's all very important. I think a back and forth like this is healthy.

Michelle Deutchman ([16:45](#)):

You mean this is actually what academic inquiry is supposed to look like. And I'm glad that both of you are modeling that. And I guess one question, before we get into the data is, why do you think this issue has become such a polarizing and combative one, sort of writ large?

Beth Niehaus ([17:03](#)):

I think that's a really good question. I think, ultimately, it's because a lot of people don't actually want to have a productive discussion about the topic. Not to speak for Sean, but my impression from our interactions in this podcast and elsewhere has been that we both care a lot about actually improving the learning experience of college students, and care very little, if at all, about furthering a particular political agenda. But that's not how most of these conversations or how much of the debate on Twitter around self-censorship actually happens or is actually grounded.

Beth Niehaus ([17:41](#)):

I think if you want to solve a problem, you work hard to identify what the problem is and what's causing it. But if you want to score political points, you take data and you over interpret it and you misinterpret it to get people riled up. And those two approaches I think are really incompatible. But I think that what gets the most play on Twitter and in the media is getting people riled up. That's not to say that there aren't a lot of these really great more academic conversations happening. That's just not, you can't fit that into a tweet. And so I think that that's where the combativeness and the polarization comes in, when instead of trying to understand and solve a problem, you're just trying to make people angry.

Michelle Deutchman ([18:28](#)):

I definitely feel like you can't say anything particularly nuanced in a tweet, or at least I haven't mastered that art. Sean, do you want to jump in?

Sean Stevens ([18:38](#)):

I mean, I largely agree with what Beth said there. I think that only things I might add is colleges and college campuses always, I think, in some ways been part of like culture war type battles. And the free speech movement in '60s at UC Berkeley started there, through to today. And I think in some ways it's reflective of broader society and kind of things that Beth talked about, of we have political actors, both politicians and then also just political actors who aren't necessarily elected officials, who have an interest in cherry picking data points to further their agenda or their goals, without putting those data points into the appropriate or broader context in which they've been collected. And that's really a disservice to what we actually kind of know about these topics. And then it also just fuels partisan divide and rancor and kind of all this stuff we don't like to see in the back and forth on cable news and Twitter.

Michelle Deutchman ([19:54](#)):

Right. So now, as the two of you get to discuss some of the data, we can stay away from that and really dig in. So Sean, much has been made of one of the central findings of FIRE's most recent student survey, and that is that more than 80% of students reported self-censoring their viewpoints at their colleges, at least some of the time, with 21% saying they censor themselves often. Can you tell us a little about the statistic? And what FIRE is trying to measure? And how you interpret these numbers?

Sean Stevens ([20:27](#)):

Yeah. And, also, I'll point out actually that the text of the question, on your campus, how often have you felt you could not express your opinion, et cetera, doesn't actually explicitly mention self-censorship. I think largely for the reasons Beth kind of got into before, as to why you don't want to call it that: it has a negative connotation. So in trying to measure the phenomenon, you don't want to, I think, necessarily name it, because of that word being charged.

Sean Stevens ([20:53](#)):

So I'll say that up front. And then the way I would interpret this is, I would stress put it into context. I think the most important thing to take away from here, if we're going to talk about who's really self-censoring on campus, is really the students that say fairly or very often. So it's the 21% figure. Putting that another way, that's roughly one in every five students, an estimate that I think you could have reasonable confidence in given the size and scope of the sample we collected. It's over 37,000 students from all over the USA, and there's a wide variety of demographics.

Sean Stevens ([21:30](#)):

So that to me is the concerning figure in all this, that one in five students say that they might be doing this often. We'll get into if that is what they're doing or not, I guess in a little bit. And then the only other thing I guess I'd add is on top of this, the hypothesis I suggested above that students whose views are in the minority should report greater pressure to self-censor. So they should report that they're doing it more often in effect in response to this question.

Sean Stevens ([22:03](#)):

And this is exactly what we find when we look at students in the political minority. And I'll emphasize that this includes the handful, and it's not that many, but the handful of campuses where liberal students are the minority of students on campus. So to me that supports this broad idea of spiral silence theory. It's a data point in that favor.

Sean Stevens ([22:23](#)):

And so just broadly going by the definition offered above, I think the 21% figure is concerning. It suggests a notable portion of students are fearful of engaging in discussions that many professors and other adults in general would consider important to the functioning of a healthy democracy. I think that that can only further contribute to some of the polarization, I think we've been discussing and are concerned about.

Michelle Deutchman ([22:52](#)):

Thanks. That's really interesting about the small data set of universities or colleges where students who are liberal or in the minority. I did not know that. So, Beth, I imagine you have some thoughts and concerns to share about these kinds of findings. And maybe you could tell us a little bit about how your qualitative research told a bit of a different story than the one that Sean is telling.

Beth Niehaus ([23:18](#)):

Sure. So from the survey data that I have, my survey data really do mirror the national, bigger surveys. The vast majority of students who responded to my survey also said that they at least sometimes hold back their opinion in class. I didn't pull out the high end of that, but my guess is that it would be very similar to the FIRE survey, and that conservative students do more frequently hold back their opinion than the liberal students.

Beth Niehaus ([23:48](#)):

But I think the advantage of digging into this more qualitatively is getting that more nuanced and complicated view of what's actually going on. What are students actually thinking about when they answer these questions? And as I suspected, when I talked with students, I really found that everyone holds back their opinion at some times, in certain situations. Even the students who I spoke with who said that they never held back their opinion, did in fact do so at certain times. Probably not in ways that would meet Sean's definition of self-censorship, but in ways that they're thinking about potentially, when we ask them questions like this.

Beth Niehaus ([24:33](#)):

And the ways that students were answering this question really varied a lot. But ultimately what students talked to me about, in terms of how they decide whether or not to speak up in class was about the context they're in. Who their audience is, whether they knew the people who were in that audience well or not, whether they had important relationships with people they were speaking with. But then also whether they could make a productive contribution to a particular discussion, and whether it was the right time and place to voice their opinion.

Beth Niehaus ([25:05](#)):

From talking with these students and getting a sense of how they actually think about their own and other students' classroom speech, I really am concerned about the validity of these survey questions. Are these survey questions actually measuring what we think they're measuring? I think for those of us who are steeped in this academic literature, who think a lot about free speech, and think a lot about self-censorship, these questions have really strong face validity. It seems to be asking what that really tight, narrow definition of self-censorship is.

Beth Niehaus ([25:40](#)):

But then when I talk with students about it, they're talking about a lot of other things. And so I think to some extent, these questions are capturing some problematic self-censorship, some concerning decisions that students might be making based on that fear of social sanction and having a minority opinion. But it's also capturing a lot of other stuff that's going on.

Beth Niehaus ([26:05](#)):

And then to the extent that these questions might be measuring a form of problematic self-censorship, I think one of the things that we're missing is what's driving that phenomenon. What is at the core of that actual problem? Why are students making the decisions that they're making? Because I think if we don't adequately identify the problem, we can't solve it. And the things that we might try to do to solve it, if we're wrong about what the problem is, might make the problem worse. And I could give examples and make that more concrete if you want, but I'll pause there so that I don't run away with the conversation.

Michelle Deutchman ([26:43](#)):

Okay. Well, you're not running away yet, but I imagine Sean has some thoughts and rejoinder. So Sean, why don't you go ahead.

Sean Stevens ([26:51](#)):

Actually, something that we haven't gone into much depth of, but we do have as part of our data, is the exception of the students who responded never. And I agree with Beth, I mean, that option's included mainly because it's like some people that they would be annoyed if they didn't have that option. But I find it hard to believe that someone has never done this. But anyone who didn't say never, we actually do follow up and we ask them to please share a moment when you personally felt you could not express your opinion on campus.

Sean Stevens ([27:27](#)):

And I can really only, right now, tell you how we're working on putting all this together, because there are actually a total of 15,360 comments, that's after removing responses that were blank or were gibberish, basically, like random letters and numbers. And then there's a little over 13,000 substantive comments. And so within there, there's roughly about 2000 comments that we do have that I think would fit Beth's findings, where students reported that they self-censor and then effectively said, "No, this never happened to me."

Sean Stevens ([28:13](#)):

Then we have 13,000 substantive comments that describe anywhere from a very brief explanation of something, which may or may not count as self-censorship under the definition I've offered, up to kind of very rich definitions of experiences that pretty clearly fit that definition. So basically, this is all very preliminary and kind of overarching, but that's what you can tell just from kind of eyeballing these comments.

Sean Stevens ([28:42](#)):

The way we're kind of tackling them is we actually currently have multiple people going through the full data set minus the blanks and the gibberish, and they're coding these comments. So they're coding for instances of self-censorship, they're coding for the topics that students mentioned, they're coding for

when students say that they don't do this, or this has never happened to them, they're coding for, if they express something that sounds more like just disinterest in the topic, or sometimes you're just being polite, because those comments do show up.

Sean Stevens ([29:18](#)):

What we do after this coding is done is we assess the strength of agreement between our raters. We've actually done some periodic check-ins to make sure they don't code everything. And then we have them totally in disagreement, so we've kind of refined their level of agreement as they've gone through an initial pool. So once they finish doing that, there's a number of analyses we can do further, which will help look at some of the questions raised by Beth's important findings. And again, to point out how this is an example of the scientific process, we're asking those questions because of the findings she has, with the more in depth interviews, which certainly go beyond this one question, where they're typing an answer in a survey box.

Michelle Deutchman ([30:08](#)):

Thanks. I have to say, Sean, I'm relieved to hear that you are not the only person who has to go through these thousands of comments. I'm glad you have some backup. So I would love to spend some time talking about, let's start with what steps universities should be taking vis-a-vis these sorts of issues? And Beth, why don't you go ahead and start?

Beth Niehaus ([30:26](#)):

Sure. I think there are a number of things that universities and folks within universities, professors, administrators can be doing. And then I hope we also get to some of the questions about what folks who are involved in the broader discussion about self-censorship should be doing. But we'll start with universities.

Beth Niehaus ([30:51](#)):

I don't know that anyone has the full answer to this, but based on my research, there are a few ideas I have for what we can be doing to help students engage more productively in robust discussions of controversial issues. I think one key takeaway that I had is that we need to provide students with the information they need to engage in discussions, and teach them how to support their assertions with evidence in discussions. So students, of course, should connect classroom learning to their personal experience and perspectives. We know that's really good teaching practice.

Beth Niehaus ([31:31](#)):

But focusing on information and evidence can help students feel more confident in contributing to class discussions, and can help keep those discussions from being about individual people in the classroom and individual people's opinions or feelings. Because that's where students who I've talked with, tend to get the most uncomfortable, where if they can depersonalize the conversation a little bit, that seems to be helpful.

Beth Niehaus ([31:58](#)):

Similarly, I think that having good ground rules and expectations so that students know where those guardrails are. A lot of students are unsure of how to express themselves without offending other people, and that's a good instinct. We need to help them figure out how to do this. So giving examples

of how to word comments constructively, and how to respond if someone says something that they disagree with or finds offensive. Students need these tools to be able to engage in these sorts of discussions that we want to see them engage in.

Beth Niehaus ([32:32](#)):

I think a lot of times in higher education, we fall into this trap of assuming that students just know how to do all of these things. But we're in the business of education, and so it's not just about the content, but also that process of engaging in education. So for example, I think just like we have students take courses on college level writing, we should have courses that all students take on engaging in dialogue. We can't assume that students come to college knowing how to do this, because they don't have much experience in high school engaging with diverse perspectives on controversial issues. And they don't see this modeled well in politics or the media.

Beth Niehaus ([33:11](#)):

And then as part of that, I think we also need to remember that students don't necessarily see the benefit of engaging in difficult or potentially controversial discussions in or out of class. This was something that was a surprise finding for me, but in hindsight probably shouldn't have been. Some students that I talked to really wanted to engage in discussion and some of them did actually do that. And some of them didn't know how to do that, and then were struggling with it.

Beth Niehaus ([33:37](#)):

But some students I talked to, more than I would've liked being someone who really cares about these issues, there were a number of students who just didn't want to engage with these issues for a variety of reasons. And so I think that those of us who are steeped in this free speech world choose to get involved in this work because we see the benefit of engagement. And sometimes we need that reminder that not everyone sees the world the same way we do. And so if we want students to engage with difficult issues, we need to teach them how, but also why they should bother to do this.

Beth Niehaus ([34:13](#)):

And so then the final point that I'll make is that a lot of what I've talked about is about individual instructors and how they structure class discussions or give those guidelines for class discussions, and background evidence that can help students do this. But ultimately many of the issues that students are grappling with when making decisions about speaking up in class are developmental in nature. So they have to do with students' cognitive development, their interpersonal skills, and their intrapersonal or identity development. And so in addition to addressing these challenges head on through, like I said, these guidelines or classes on discourse and discussion, debate, also just need to be thinking about the entire student experience in higher education, both in and out of the classroom, and how the various pieces of that experience are promoting development in all of these areas.

Beth Niehaus ([35:11](#)):

Because the more that students are able to grapple with cognitively complex issues and be comfortable with ambiguity and weigh the evidence among different competing claims of truth, which is really complex, cognitive skills, the more they're able to navigate complex interpersonal issues, all of these things play into their willingness and ability to engage in the types of discussions that we're talking about here. So I think it's both addressing this head on, but then also recognizing all of the things that go into how students think about and engage in discussions.

Michelle Deutchman ([35:53](#)):

Thanks, Beth, that's a great and very comprehensive answer. And in some ways the things that you're pointing out about learning how to engage in difficult conversations reminds me of what I experience when I facilitate conversations about the First Amendment and free speech. And realizing that there's a similar set of assumptions, right, that students when they come to college, understand how the First Amendment works. And then even more than that, they understand why it's valuable to protect hateful speech. And I think neither of those is true in a lot of cases. And I think that creates a lot of problems. So Sean, I'd love to hear from you about what you think universities should be doing. And then we can also open it up to, as Beth suggested, folks who are steeped in this all the time.

Sean Stevens ([36:41](#)):

Sure. I mean, I don't think there's really anything I disagree with in Beth's answer. I mean, I would kind of maybe just add a little bit broader context on things. I think a lot of the difficulties that we see around these issues and that you've both kind of described and hinted at that not every student wants to engage in such discussions. Students don't necessarily come to college prepared to engage in discussions. I freely agree with, and I think it's a broader reflection of a lot of the polarization and more negative discourse we see in society more broadly. I think I find it sad almost to see, and not just in students, just whenever anyone takes a... They hear a viewpoint of somebody else's and it's something that they don't agree with or even find very offensive, but then there's this almost domino effect or cascading effect of all these other negative assumptions get attached to that person now.

Sean Stevens ([37:55](#)):

And I think a lot of what Beth was describing, the desirable outcomes from those programs would be like reducing the occurrence of that type of thinking, reducing the occurrence of binary dichotomous thinking, and trying to embrace the complexity of issues more. College, as an environment, ideally would be the space where... one of these safest, if not the safest places to explore these issues and to inculcate these behaviors.

Sean Stevens ([38:30](#)):

So I also want to link back to something that might seem not even related to self-censorship at all, but I think it's related to Beth's observation that there's a number of students who, it's almost like you could describe them as they feel disengaged, or they don't want to, there's no interest in these conversations. And I just wanted to note that there's actually been a number of stories recently in like the Chronicle of Higher Ed, Inside Higher Ed, in the more higher education space publications, where you have professors kind of bemoaning the current level of disengagement among their students, and the difficulty they're having getting them engaged in course material.

Michelle Deutchman ([39:15](#)):

I mean, that, I think, could be a topic for a different episode of this podcast. I guess, I'm just, I'm really impressed and happy about this discussion. And I think that it really showcases how, when, like you said, you can just have a conversation with someone and really be able to engage on a very rich level. And I'm not surprised that you have many things that you share in common. And I think you could even take your show on the road, because I do not think that there are enough people who are having these kinds of nuanced, complex conversations to really showcase, not just that people look at things through different lenses, but even if you're looking through different lenses, there's still a lot of overlap in terms of your concentric circles. So I really appreciate both of you giving your time and expertise today.

Michelle Deutchman ([40:05](#)):

And before I give you each a chance to add anything, I do want to ask sort of a signature SpeechMatters question, which is, we are a center for free speech and civic engagement, and I always want to try to leave the listeners with something that they can do or think about. And I'm wondering if each of you could suggest maybe one thing that folks can do with regard to kind of expression and engagement on campus. It can be related to this issue of self-censorship or self-editing, or it can be more broadly about sort of free speech expression climate. And Sean, why don't you go ahead?

Sean Stevens ([40:43](#)):

I think a way to engage or at least interact or be aware of the information in this space. I would urge everybody to really keep in mind that it's likely that each campus has its own unique expression environment or its own challenges. I wouldn't paint all these individual campuses with such a broad brush. That's one of the things we hope comes out of our campus expression, our college rankings data is helping students identify the campuses where they would want to attend. And it's kind of set up. We have a certain way of ranking them, where we rank them and our emphasis is on, it has a strong culture for expression.

Sean Stevens ([41:38](#)):

But by presenting the data and the way we present it, anybody could use it and say, "Well, you know what? I'm not really interested in having such difficult conversations and I'd actually rather go to a place where that's less likely for it to occur. And I'm more likely to encounter more like minded individuals." The data's there for you to make that decision with.

Sean Stevens ([41:59](#)):

And I guess my broad recommendation is just kind of keep in mind that each campus is going to be unique in its own way. And I wouldn't rush to judgment about any of them. And I wouldn't rush to judgment about this issue either, especially the way it's covered by politicians and the broader press.

Michelle Deutchman ([42:20](#)):

Thanks, Sean. Okay, Beth.

Beth Niehaus ([42:23](#)):

I think the one thing, it's both broadly about expression engagement and also connected to this topic of student self-censorship, is I think those of us in a higher ed need to make sure that we are paying attention to, caring about, and responding to what's happening in K12 education.

Beth Niehaus ([42:45](#)):

Some of this has been happening and higher ed as well, but the number of cases of book bans and restrictions of topics that can be discussed in K12 education across the country right now is really concerning. And even if you only care about what's going on in higher education, I think that what I learned from my conversations with students about them not coming to college prepared to engage with difficult topics, is because they're not engaging with them in high school or earlier. And that's only going to get worse when we start restricting what K12 educators can bring into their classrooms. And so I think we really need to be responding to censorship efforts across the P-20 education continuum, but especially right now in P-12 education.

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Michelle Deutchman ([43:43](#)):

I think that's a great way for us to end, because I think it's always important to remember that this is a continuum of education that begins long before students arrive on college campuses. And that really the responsibility for all of this cannot be put only on colleges and universities. And that's something I think is important to think about. And I know the Center has done some programming and so forth to try to connect those two more, because they really do impact each other.

Michelle Deutchman ([44:11](#)):

And with that, I think I'm going to wrap up. Thank you both again, so much. I'm looking forward to reading whatever is the next version, iteration of the 13,000 comments, Sean. And of course, Beth, looking forward to seeing the work that comes out of your senior fellowship. So thanks, any other last words?

Sean Stevens ([44:32](#)):

I actually just wanted to say I think Beth's point about K through 12 is excellent. I think, yes, of course it feeds into how college is experienced. And then that's why also I think people should be concerned with what goes on in higher education, because then it feeds into the professional world afterwards.

Michelle Deutchman ([44:50](#)):

I know everyone's sort of getting ready to head into summer. I expect that we will hear more about this issue as everyone prepares for the upcoming academic year. And as we move forward into a fall that also involves upcoming elections. And so, you know what, we might have to have you back.

Beth Niehaus ([45:07](#)):

Happy to be back, anytime.

Michelle Deutchman ([45:08](#)):

Thanks so much.

Sean Stevens ([45:10](#)):

Yep. You're welcome. Thank you.

Michelle Deutchman ([45:15](#)):

Even though the academic year has come to a close, issues of free expression and civic engagement are not on hiatus and neither are we. SpeechMatters will be back next month with our next episode. We look forward to talking with you then.