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Free Speech Zones on Campus

By Patty Kean

Many students encounter political diversity for the first time when they get to college. Their temptation is to stay with what is known and comfortable, so they often find other students from similar backgrounds and together create a world that resembles their home neighborhoods and schools. But if postsecondary education is to prepare students to participate meaningfully in the democratic process, they need to engage meaningfully in transformative and political conversations outside the classroom as well as within it. Through intentional facilitation of these conversations, we encourage the development of broader and integrated perspectives.

The Diversity Committee at Curry College, composed of students, staff, and faculty, responded to this challenge by initiating a forum called “Peace and Justice: Questions and Conversations.” The format and topics of the conversations change semester by semester, but they all aim to create a space and time for serious discussions about peace and “justice for all” within a democratic society.

Two teach-in events at Curry College, held in spring 2003 during the congressional debate about the invasion of Iraq and on the day it began, were the forerunners of the peace and justice series. At the first teach-in, faculty, students, and staff explored issues concerning the proposed war. The standing-room-only crowd courageously and respectfully engaged the realities of war, sacrifice, patriotism, liberty, justice, and peace. During the second teach-in, which lasted all day, televisions showed news of the invasion, but

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the sound was turned down when students or faculty chose to share a reading, a poem, or a thought for public reflection and responses.

During the next semester, when the conversations began, the Diversity Committee chose a text on which to focus discussion—*War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, written by journalist Chris Hedges. We hoped the text would help keep the community engaged in soul searching and questioning about the Iraq war and the use of war in general.

The next semester, we read *Tried by Fire*, by Bassam Abu-Sharif, who served as strategist, spy, and magazine editor for the Palestine Liberation Organization, and Uzi Mahnaimi, a former Israeli spymaster. *Tried by Fire* features the narratives of the authors, which are a personal history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This choice of text and topic was met with immediate controversy; some were concerned about a pro-Palestinian bias. The conversations themselves, however, calmed fears. Three Jewish students who came to “defend” Israeli policies stayed to join the conversation by sharing their knowledge of Israeli politics. The group grew in trust through discussions about the hard issues and differing perspectives involved in the tragedy of this conflict.

In spring 2004, Massachusetts recognized gay marriage. The Diversity Committee invited professors to dedicate half of one class period during a specified week to questions and conversations about the controversy over homosexual marriage. Several professors responded, and all reported that these conversations were serious and engaged—students clearly valued the opportunity to consider this issue in a structured format.

The fall semester of the 2004 presidential elections begged for some outright political debate along with a bit of satire. We set up the President's Dining Room as a free speech zone. The campus office in charge of buildings and grounds generously provided us with the neon orange plastic netting used to create off-limits spaces. We draped it across the wall in the conference room, which is located in the main student dining room. The Diversity Committee invited students, faculty, and staff to make creative, colorful political posters to hang on the netting. Although both presidential candidates were represented, the posters overwhelmingly favored John Kerry and opposed George Bush. We wondered if this uneven split suggested that these types of conversations attract participants with a more liberal or progressive bias.

Professors participated in the free-speech-zone event by screening the documentary *Outfoxed*, which critiques Fox News and the media in general. They led a discussion of the election issues and facilitated a conversation on human rights. All these events were well attended by both faculty and students. Moreover, they were more politically balanced than the posters outside the President's Dining Room would

have suggested—although there was a strong liberal leaning among the faculty participants.

The Diversity Committee also set up a table outside the dining room and registered two hundred student voters with assistance from Rock the Vote, an organization that promotes voter registration among young people. The table created an incidental and informal but powerful space for public conversations about the election and its issues. It was not uncommon to hear students ask one another about their preferred candidates at the table and walk into the dining room deep in political conversation.

How do we keep students, faculty, and staff interested in creating and attending conversations about peace, justice, and democracy? The Diversity Committee is actively reaching out to student-activities and residence-life programming as well as academics. We will continue to use film, documentary, and text to spur conversations, and we are hopeful that the program will continue to enrich campus life by giving rise to real conversations about policies that influence individual participation in the democratic process for peace and justice.

Patty Kean is an educational therapist and co-chair of the Diversity Committee at Curry College. [Back to top.](#)

Homogeneity and Free Speech in Utah

By David R. Keller

Utah County is perhaps the reddest county in the reddest state of the union, and at its center is Utah Valley State College. So it was hardly surprising that the student government's booking of a speaking engagement by filmmaker Michael Moore in fall 2004 spark-ed controversy. That UVSC does not strictly model its educational program on the normative standards of the surrounding community raises the ire of many citizens, who see UVSC's proper identity as a mirror of the local "conservative" value system.

Many expressed shock at the apparent lack of authoritative oversight of student government. Some said the administration should intervene and cancel the event. An anonymously written memo turned up in some faculty boxes, arguing that all faculty should boycott the event.

Hoping some good could come out of the controversy, I or-ganized a panel discussion and open public forum to discuss it. As the event began, I stood at the front of an auditorium and watched 300 people cram into a space with seating for 160 while the cameras, the camcorders, and a low-level murmur charged the air with anticipatory electricity. I thought to myself, "This is what college is all about—curiosity, conversation, commitment!"

Some of the parents attending the forum supported Moore

's visit, notwithstanding his work. A mother of three UVSC students—one of whom just spent a year in Iraq—stated, “I disagree with Moore’s ideas, but I’m glad he’s coming. Try not to go in there with all these preconceived ideas. Go in there with an open mind.”

The atmosphere really intensified when an outspoken critic of UVSC held up a cashier’s check for \$25,000 and vowed to hand it over only if Moore’s invitation were rescinded, explaining, “I should not have to send my children to a private university [that is, Brigham Young University, which is part of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints education system] to get a conservative education when I live in a conservative community and have a state college in my backyard that is paid for by conservative taxpayers and donors. A balanced education does not require that we teach our children to be so open minded that their brains fall out.”

He claimed that “the most liberal of the leftist liberals . . . are the people [whom] we in Utah County . . . were trying to keep out of here.” A student responded, to applause, “It’s important that we . . . remember that this state was founded by people [who] were chased out of town,” alluding to the history of persecution of Mormons in Illinois .

The activist who tried to buy the cancellation of the event later filed a lawsuit against UVSC, claiming procedural violations of policy. Defending his action, he said, “If you stand for something and speak your mind, people will try to shut you down,” sparking accusations of utter hypocrisy.

Although the lawsuit was subsequently dropped, the plaintiff’s contention that Utah County taxpayers who endeavor to inculcate conservative values in their children should not be paying “liberal” professors caused palpable unease on campus.

Also troubling, donors vociferously reversed pledges with symbolic flourish. Such actions are self-defeating, of course, because withholding funds only makes it more difficult for UVSC to serve democracy by fostering dialogue.

The controversy cut to the core of the role and responsibility of higher education in a pluralistic democracy, especially in homogeneous communities, and several lessons can be learned from the episode.

- a. Student government is by definition the exercise of self-governance by students for educational purposes. Student government should not be a puppet regime of the executive office.
- b. Usually apathetic student populations can become energized and engaged. Suddenly students were organizing protests, marching up and down the hallways of the student center with placards for and against Moore,

voicing opinions at demonstrations, instigating petition drives, writing letters, and criticizing or defending their own student government.

c. Students can sort through complex social issues, and their autonomy should be respected. My students were offended by the notion that they needed to be protected and sheltered from a national public policy debate, stating that they were mature enough to sort through nuanced political issues and draw their own conclusions.

d. In multicultural societies, pluralism must be nurtured and affirmed. Democracy simply cannot function otherwise. "Conservatism" properly embraces the fundamental principles of liberal democracy: pluralism, dialogue, mutual respect, and civility.

The Moore incident demonstrates that public institutions of higher education must resist the temptation to capitulate to economic and political expediency. In open societies, the importance of colleges and universities is directly proportional to the homogeneity of the communities they serve, such as UVSC. In the end, Moore came, ranted, and left. The fabric of society was not noticeably ripped asunder, and Utah County voted overwhelmingly for Bush. Most important, though, the controversy fostered a healthy—if trying—exercise for a traditionally insular community in civic engagement.

David Keller is director of the Center for the Study of Ethics and associate professor of philosophy at Utah Valley State College. [Back to text.](#)

Whose Truth?

By Maurice Isserman

One way to fight back against contemporary assaults on the values of the American academy is to expose lies when we hear them. In that spirit, I offer the following story, which suggests how little respect conservative activist David Horowitz has for the truth when it proves politically inconvenient.

On Tuesday evening, February 1, 2005, two days before University of Colorado professor Ward Churchill was scheduled to speak at Hamilton College, Horowitz, who campaigns against "leftist bias" on U.S. campuses, appeared as a guest on Fox News Channel's *The O'Reilly Factor*. He proceeded to bash U.S. higher education in general and Hamilton College in particular as bastions of left-wing extremism.

Churchill had been invited to Hamilton by the college-

affiliated Kirkland Project for the Study of Gender, Society, and Culture. The invitation stirred outraged protests, however, after wider publication of previously obscure and highly offensive remarks he had made several years earlier about those who perished on September 11, 2001, at the World Trade Center. He wrote shortly after the attacks that they were not innocent victims but “little Eichmanns” who deserved their fate. As it turned out, on the day of the O’Reilly broadcast, Churchill’s invitation to speak at Hamilton was withdrawn in the face of death threats against him and others.

Using the Churchill controversy as evidence, Horowitz told O’Reilly’s audience that on contemporary college campuses the prevailing political climate is “the kind of intimidating situation you see in societies run by fear . . . hard-core Marxist radicalism.” The show’s transcript also includes the following exchange about an appearance by Horowitz in 2002 on the Hamilton campus.

O’Reilly: You know—but it is to Hamilton’s credit that you were invited to speak there, correct?

Horowitz: Yes. Well, I—you know, the conservative kids invited me. It’s a little different when you’re invited as a—you know, a speaker paid by and invited by the faculty. It’s not like the faculty brought me up there.

I’ve been called many things since I joined the history department at Hamilton College, but that was the first time I’ve been called a “conservative kid.” The fact is that it was not conservative kids who first brought Horowitz to our campus: three years ago, I invited him to speak to the students in my seminar on the history of the 1960s and to debate me in a public forum on the legacy of that conflict-ridden decade. In the course of an e-mail exchange on an unrelated matter in summer 2002, Horowitz complained to me that he had never once been officially invited to speak at a college. Because I was teaching a course in the fall where I could slot him in, I spontaneously extended an offer to him to come speak at Hamilton.

But don’t take my word for it—simply go to the archives of Horowitz’s own Web magazine, *Frontpage*, and look up his blog entry for September 18, 2002: “Today, I am at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., to speak on the [s]ixties. It is one of the rare occasions I have been officially invited, in this case by historian Maurice Isserman [who is] . . . that rare specimen, an honest leftist.” After more compliments to his host and to other faculty members he met while on campus, Horowitz concluded, “Hamilton College scores better than your average school in terms of diversity of faculty views.”

Contrary to the impression he gave on *The O’Reilly Factor*, Horowitz was, in fact, an official guest of Hamilton College in fall 2002, invited by a faculty member, introduced at his talk

by the dean of the faculty, and generously compensated for his time.

Michael Bérubé, a literature professor at Pennsylvania State University and a liberal blogger, whose [article appears below](#), noticed the discrepancy between the version Horowitz offered on the O'Reilly show and his 2002 comments. Bérubé tweaked him on the conflicting accounts in a February 23, 2005, blog. Horowitz responded on his own Web site:

My appearance on *O'Reilly* did present me with a problem. I had called Maurice Isserman[,] a leftwing academic I knew at Hamilton [,] and asked him to invite me to speak on campus[,] which he graciously did. O'Reilly was asking me a question [about whether] . . . I get faculty invitations to speak on campuses. I have spoken on somewhere between 250 and 300 college campuses in the last fifteen years. The invitation from Isserman is the only faculty invitation I have ever received. . . . On *O'Reilly* I didn't have time to explain all this and so I glossed over it because it was truer to say that I had to be invited by students (and the second time I went that was exactly the case) than to say the faculty there . . . the Kirkland Project in particular . . . would invite me.

When push came to shove, and Horowitz had to choose between (a) acknowledging before a national television audience something he had previously stated as fact on his Web site and (b) lying, he chose lying. Telling the truth would have undermined his entire premise (that is, that conservatives are excluded and discriminated against on college campuses as a matter of routine policy). Then later, when called on the lie by Michael Bérubé, he explained that it was "truer" to say what was untrue, that he had been invited there by conservative students, rather than by faculty members.

The simple truth is that Hamilton College has always welcomed speakers from the right and the left: prominent conservatives who have spoken on campus in recent years as official guests include Margaret Thatcher, William F. Buckley, Phyllis Schlafly, Dinesh d'Souza—and David Horowitz. For Horowitz, however, the truer truth is that Hamilton College is just another outpost of the left-wing academic gulag, in which viewpoints like his own are ruthlessly suppressed.

There is nothing original in the subordination of truth to political expediency. It was a commonplace practice among totalitarian movements of the left and the right in the twentieth century. Still, if Horowitz would like to come back to Hamilton to explain to my students why he prefers his "truer truth" to the old-fashioned variety that we like to practice here, he has a standing invitation to do so.

Maurice Isserman is professor of history at Hamilton College . The author of many books, he is currently writing a history of Himalayan mountaineering. [Back to top.](#)

Blogging Back at the Right

By Michael Bérubé

My first personal Web site, created for me in 2002 by a former student, Kurt Nelson, was an online archive of my published work, with hyperlinks to available essays. (It was not linked to my faculty listing on the English department's Web site at Penn State .) About twenty or thirty people a month stopped by, according to Kurt's record keeping. The site had a front page on which I could post notices and direct readers to other materials online.

When I began reading blogs regularly in early 2003, I tried every once in a while to treat my bulletin board as a blog. But it didn't have the two things every blog needs: permalinks, which enable other bloggers to cite specific blog entries, or the capacity to embed hyperlinks in a block of written text.

Things changed, however, after December 2003, when I published an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that quickly made the rounds of right-wing blogs. The essay was about dealing with an outspoken conservative student, whom I did not want to silence in class but whose tendency to take over classroom discussions had become grating to many of his peers. I concluded the essay by suggesting that although all students should be reasonably accommodated in classroom discussion, this principle is difficult to observe when a student's sense of what's reasonable differs so dramatically from one's own. I drew the phrase "reasonably accommodated" from disability law, which I considered to be appropriate because it involves a universal principle for taking into account individual idiosyncrasy. In response, a conservative blogger read my essay as evidence that I consider conservatives to be mentally disabled—an interpretation that I cannot credit as "reasonable."

I soon learned how the worst of the blogosphere works: snippets of text are taken out of context and batted around the Internet like beach balls in football stadiums. Before you know it, you can find yourself the object of a national campaign of outrage and denunciation. In 2004, conservative history professor Robert David "KC" Johnson of Brooklyn College upped the ante yet again, writing on the right-wing site Campus Watch that "the nation's leading academic journal, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, published an essay by Penn State English professor Michael Bérubé *advising professors* to treat conservative students as they would students with learning disabilities or who exhibited aberrant behavior." (Emphasis added.) So I suggested to Kurt that I needed to convert my Web site into a blog, if only for self-defense; Kurt responded by creating a

new domain name (www.michaelberube.com) and setting up an account with a software company that develops products and hosting services for online publishers.

On my second day of blogging in 2004, *Nation* columnist and online media critic Eric Alterman linked to one of my postings. Suddenly, I found myself with five hundred readers on a daily basis. Later, I added a comment section to the blog, allowing readers to post responses to me and to each other. By election day, I had a monthly readership of a hundred thousand. After my blog wound up as a finalist for three different “Koufax Awards” in early 2005 (a competition among liberal bloggers, named after the greatest lefty of them all), my daily readership soared to over five thousand.

Now, whenever someone takes extraordinary liberties with my work, I have what amounts to a rapid-response device. When *FrontPage*, the online magazine of conservative activist David Horowitz, ran an “exchange” with me in which it dropped fifteen paragraphs from my reply to Horowitz and then berated me for my “intellectual laziness,” I promptly reproduced all fifteen paragraphs on my own site and accused Horowitz of rigging the debate. Horowitz’s assistant, Jamie Glazov, assured me that the error was inadvertent, and I believe him—but I also believe that if I had not had a blog, *FrontPage* would never have bothered to correct the error in the first place.

I don’t mean to suggest that blogs are useful only, or even primarily, as a means of self-defense. Mine is also an outlet for all kinds of whimsical, satirical, and occasional writing—from musings on the paradoxical status of autonomy in disability-studies debates to parodies of contemporary political events to discussions of popular music and film—that I simply can’t or won’t do anywhere else. (Though occasionally the blog has become a vehicle for writing elsewhere: one of my posts on disability was noticed by the *Boston Globe*, which then invited me to comment on the case of Terri Schiavo, the severely brain damaged Florida woman who died in March after removal of her feeding tube.) I don’t blog about my department, my university, or (except on rare occasions) my discipline, partly because I think of blogging as the kind of writing I do when I’m *not* doing my day job, and partly because my service on departmental, college, and disciplinary committees usually prevents me from commenting on such matters without violating committee confidentiality.

Although my blog can be quite personal in its politics, there’s no reason to think of blogs as atomized, individualized affairs. Blogs can also be used as clearinghouses or news aggregators about matters that pertain to contemporary assaults on academic freedom. I sometimes think that if academic bloggers had pool-ed their resources more effectively in 2003, we wouldn’t have had to wait two years for a print journalist to debunk David Horowitz’s claim that a student from an unnamed “Colorado college” had been flunked by her leftist professor for

refusing to write an essay on why George Bush is a war criminal.

To date, conservatives have been far more effective at using “aggregator” blogs, like Instapundit and Powerline, to generate political groundswells and feed mainstream media. There are no intrinsic politics to blogging, however, and liberal academics can—and should—make far more extensive use of the form than we’ve yet attempted. It’s not an ideal form for scholarly exchange, to be sure, but it is exceptionally versatile (I have already come to think of hyperlinks as far more substantive modes of citation than traditional footnotes). So far, only a few of us have even begun to explore its versatility—for self-defense, for the popularization of academic work, for new forms of collaborative scholarship and communication, and for those most venerable of pedagogical goals, delight and instruction.

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