

GUEST COMMENTARY

Student protests need not have thrown college campuses into chaos



State troopers tried to break up a pro-Palestinian protest at the University of Texas in Austin, Texas last month. (Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman via AP)

By David A. Armstrong, J.D.
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It did not have to be this way. Student protests need not have thrown college campuses into chaos. More than [2,900 arrests](#) on campuses did not have to happen.

Colleges must do a better job of proactively enforcing their policies and procedures, condemning hate and defining free speech versus illicit action, while promoting intellectual diversity.

Consider Columbia University. Pro-Palestinian protesters hid in Hamilton Hall and eventually succeeded in helping other students unlawfully occupy the building, even though custodians warned of repeated threats.

Held against their will, petrified Columbia staff tried to [fight their way out](#) through the protesters, who ruled the academic building for almost 20 hours until police removed and arrested nearly 50 of them.

It is the responsibility of university presidents nationwide to champion debate and call out hate masquerading as free speech, while not allowing students to disrupt campuses.

The presidents of the [University of Pennsylvania](#) and [Harvard](#) recently resigned following a public outcry after they told Congress they would have to make “context-dependent decisions” about whether they would allow their students to call for all Jews to die.

Hate abounds across campuses, from antisemitic cartoons targeting Berkeley Law School Dean Erwin Chemerinsky to [signs at U.C. Santa Barbara declaring](#), “Zionists not allowed.”

The First Amendment does not absolve students from accountability for hateful, threatening or abusive speech that expresses prejudice.

Decades of judicial precedent have established time, place and manner restrictions for speech, provided people have ample non-disruptive ways to express themselves. Incitement, fighting words and threats are all unprotected speech.

Even on public campuses, university presidents can ban bullhorns and loudspeakers, end demonstrations that stop traffic or prevent picketing inside an office.

University presidents should subject protesters to immediate consequences for attempting to deprive graduates of commencements, which should be among the happiest, most memorable moments in a college student’s journey.

College presidents would do well to follow the example of University of Florida President Ben Sasse, who drew a clear line between speech and action by enforcing longstanding rules forbidding campus camping and harassment.

As [President Sasse said](#), “We will always defend your right to free speech and free assembly. Also, we have time, place, and manner restrictions, and you don’t get to take over the whole university. People don’t get to spit at cops. You don’t get to barricade yourselves in buildings. You don’t get to disrupt somebody else’s commencement.”

The University of Florida is a public school. Private institutions such as Columbia have even wider legal leeway to impose restrictions on speech and protests that undermine campus safety.

Inconsistent policies regarding free speech and behavior regulation undermine campus leaders’ credibility and contribute to a culture of selective intolerance.

College leaders must establish and enforce clear, consistent rules that support free speech and de-escalate conflicts. No protesters are entitled to behave disruptively or even violently behavior regardless of ideology.

Just as colleges today would never tolerate students calling for the death of Black or LGBTQ students, there is no place for students threatening violence against “Zionists.”

Civil protests have a place, but university administrators, faculty, staff and students must carry on discussions about views and boundaries. The First Amendment calls for protesters to assemble “peaceably.”

Dialogue promotes intellectual diversity, an often overlooked yet equally critical form of on-campus diversity. As Irene Mulvey, president of the American Association of University Professors, has said of the current campus protests, “The way forward is through education, dialogue, communication.”

A November Anti-Defamation League study found that nearly six in 10 (55.8%) college students completed required diversity, equity, and inclusion training. Yet, fewer than one in five college students (18.1%) are mandated to complete religious acceptance training such as a course to combat antisemitism or Islamophobia.

It is time for colleges to teach mutual respect and tolerance for different religions. Education and communication beget empathy and compassion. At their best, colleges teach students how to think, not what to think.

Only education, debate, civil discourse and ideological diversity can bring love and light back to college campuses. As Martin Luther King Jr., one of my heroes, said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”

David A. Armstrong, J.D., is the president of St. Thomas University in Miami Gardens, Florida. The university’s Interfaith Leadership Institute is currently developing religious tolerance training to fight antisemitism and Islamophobia and foster religious acceptance, drawing partly on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s curriculum.