

Some Universities Care about Free Speech . . . until They Don't



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Arizona State University's commitment to free speech didn't survive contact with a campus controversy, illuminating the challenges true campus intellectual diversity faces today.

IN February, the faculty of Arizona State's honors college, Barrett, arose in collective outrage at an event entitled "Health, Wealth, and Happiness." Thirty-nine of the 47 faculty members at the college signed a letter condemning the event to the dean, Tara Williams. The event was said to feature "white nationalists" and "purveyors of hate who have publicly attacked women, people of color, the LGBTQ community, as well as the institutions of our democracy."

One student, who wishes to remain nameless, told me her professor devoted ten minutes of class time to venting her “active opposition” to the event. “It scared me from wanting to attend,” she said. She imagined it must be dangerous.

It will come as no surprise to the astute reader that the “Health, Wealth, and Happiness” event was neither a Klan rally nor a January 6 reenactment. I should know: I organized it. Sponsored by the T. W. Lewis Center for Personal Development at ASU, where I served as executive director, “Health, Wealth, and Happiness” featured Robert Kiyosaki (author of *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*), Dennis Prager, Turning Point USA’s Charlie Kirk, and heart-transplant cardiologist Radha Gopalan.

I looked forward to organizing the event with Kiyosaki and Tom Lewis, a conservative donor, in large part because ASU is celebrated for its strong stance on free speech. I learned the hard way about a culture incongruent with those ideals. ASU’s faculty was right, about one thing: The event *did* prove dangerous. Not to “the LGBTQ community” or “the institutions of our democracy,” but rather to those of us who dared to organize an event at odds with the prevailing orthodoxy. Four months later, “Health, Wealth, and Happiness” has led directly to the firing of the events operations manager of the Gammage Auditorium (where it took place), the termination of my position, and the dismantling of the Lewis Center.

This is the story of how a nonpartisan event about a noncontroversial subject matter on a pro-free-speech campus nevertheless led to outrage, chilled speech, and firings. It illuminates the extent to which hostility toward divergent views is the norm and how much power faculty and administrators wield in thwarting the intentions of donors and the interests of students. Donors, parents, and prospective students: Learn from the ASU controversy — and apply those lessons to where you entrust your gifts and your futures.

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“Health, Wealth, and Happiness” was part of a popular speaker series hosted by the Lewis Center. Experienced professionals introduce students to practical career and life advice—on everything from developing a professional network to buying a car. Robert Kiyosaki pitched the idea after participating in other Lewis Center workshops. He proposed inviting Dennis Prager and his physician; Kirk was a later addition to the lineup, at Lewis’s suggestion.

Kirk and Prager are political lightning rods, to be sure. But “ASU is committed to free, robust, and uninhibited sharing of ideas,” President Crow has proclaimed. The school carries a “Green Light” rating from the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) and has signed the Chicago Statement on freedom of expression. ASU has also benefited from donor-sponsored initiatives such as the Lewis Center, which Tom Lewis, a conservative donor, founded at the honors college to provide classes such as “Entrepreneurship and Free-Enterprise,” “Life Skills and Personal Finance,” and “Success, Purpose, and Happiness.”

The Lewis Center also sponsored a speaker series on topics pertaining to traditional American values including personal responsibility, hard work, civic duty, faith, family, and community service. It was a beacon of light in ASU’s honors college, whose faculty study things like “settler colonialism,” witchcraft, and gender theory. When news of the event with Prager and Kirk spread, more than three-quarters of the faculty reacted with all the intolerance that ideological uniformity breeds. ASU was “platforming and legitimizing their extreme anti-intellectual and anti-democratic views,” they claimed, simply by allowing students the chance to hear from Kiyosaki, Prager, and Kirk on any topic. They postured on Twitter, organized a counter-event (a “teach-in” on inclusive education), and circulated a petition at change.org to “protest the idea of a university donor being able to determine the events hosted.” A flyer promoting the petition simply read: “Dennis Prager and Charlie Kirk . . . are transphobic, racist, homophobic and responsible for the dangerous ‘Professor Watchlist.’ Supporting this talk is dangerous.”

“I’ve been the faculty senate president for my campus,” says Owen Anderson, a professor of philosophy and religion at ASU, “and I’ve seen the provost and faculty all agree to the Chicago Statement for freedom of expression. But many faculty only subscribe in theory. In practice many faculty insult and refuse to listen. ‘We’re open to academic freedom,’ they say, ‘we’re just not open to bigots or phobics.’” (Anderson notes, per the provost’s instructions, that he speaks only as a private citizen — as he does on his Substack documenting the ideological climate at ASU.)

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While the ASU administration did not publicly respond to the faculty letter, fliers were torn from campus and digital advertising scrubbed from campus walls. The dean also told me I couldn’t send an email promoting the event lest students receive too many emails. (The counter-event “teach-in” was still promoted.) She emailed faculty and staff, offering “counseling and support resources to anyone who may need them due to the program’s impact.”

Behind closed doors, the dean pressured me to postpone the event. I was informed that the speakers must limit their remarks to health, wealth, and happiness — and that they should not discuss higher education, or anything political. I was informed that crossing those lines would not be in the Lewis Center’s “best interests,” which I interpreted as a threat. I was also instructed to warn the audience in my opening remarks about potentially offensive speech and was assigned a deadline to compose and submit the warning statement, allowing the dean sufficient time to review it.

Just to cover their bases, they also brought in a marketing firm that proposed a media statement in the event that the honors college was asked why it had not canceled the event: “Some of the speakers believe they are rebels and canceling the event would feed into that false narrative. They are not rebels. There is nothing new or rebellious about using fear and lies to oppress people.”

“What is to say the Lewis Center would not invite the KKK as a future speaker?” I was asked in a meeting with this firm. “Because some of the values of these speakers are similar to the KKK.” Ironically, our “Health, Wealth, and Happiness” panel consisted of individuals of Sri Lankan and Japanese heritage, as well as a religious Jew.

I was shocked that ASU would attempt to restrict what invited speakers could or could not say. I was also shocked that the dean would make thinly veiled threats against the future of the Lewis Center. But I did not bend before administrative pressure, and the event itself turned out to be a tremendous success. Approximately 1,500 people attended in person, and another 24,000 streamed it online. Attendees received observations about the keys to a good life that were neither inflammatory nor political — except insofar as they suggested that people are responsible for their own futures and happiness.

There was no student protest, nor any other disturbance at the event. Even the Change.org petition against it received a paltry 198 signatures. In this light, the resistance to the event seemed astroturfed — a faculty tantrum that the university ultimately ignored.

I wish that were the case. The truth is more complicated, and the implications more bleak.

First, the faculty outrage did affect students. Graham Armknecht, an ASU student who attended the event, estimated that the average age of attendees was closer to 30 than 20 and that it largely consisted of the general public. “The 18-year-old freshmen who need to be inspired with a growth mindset over an oppression mindset . . . broadly speaking were not in that room,” Armknecht said. He thinks that faculty efforts to condemn the event are one of the main reasons why.

“Most freshmen are afraid to speak out on matters such as these because they are afraid of the repercussions they will face from faculty,” one student said. Others told me they were “scared to be seen at this event” because going against their professors’ opinions put their grades at risk. Dr. Anderson notes that typical grading schemas today include large chunks — up to 25 percent — for interpersonal and holistic categories such as “participation.” This gives faculty significant leverage over what students will say, do, or allow themselves to think.

Yes, it’s ironic that the same professors who unmask power inequalities in their scholarship exploited those inequalities for political ends in their teaching. But there’s nothing funny about the problem. It means that intellectual diversity was stifled at the ground level, even with robustly pro-free-speech policies (and gift agreements) in place.

Second, the university did not stand up for intellectual diversity. ASU offered no response to the faculty protest, nor did it reiterate its commitment to freedom of expression. Instead, leadership of the honors college appeared to collude with the faculty to chill speech it did not like. The dean pressured me to postpone the event indefinitely, removed all advertising from campus walls, and called in a public-relations firm to suggest that bringing Prager, Kiyosaki, and Kirk to campus was akin to inviting the KKK.

Given the powerful influence that faculty exert over the classroom climate, an institution must offer an equally powerful assertion of the importance of openly discussing opposing views and of hearing from different viewpoints. In the heat of the faculty condemnation campaign, ASU was silent. Meanwhile, the honors college offered “counseling and support” to anyone “impacted” by the program.

Third, the people who put on the event paid a steep price. In the weeks following the “Health, Wealth, and Happiness” event, Lin Blake, the events operations manager who ran the program on behalf of Gammage Auditorium, was fired. Blake told me that before her firing, she was “berated by ASU Gammage leadership for coordinating an event that did not align with the values of ASU Gammage.” She has also said, “Leadership of ASU Gammage asked why” she “booked a white supremacist.” Following the program, Blake said leadership withdrew her ability to book events without first obtaining supervisor approval.

Then, on May 30, I was notified that my position as executive director of the Lewis Center was being terminated as of June 30. This “purely fiscal decision” was attributed to Lewis’s ending his support of ASU in light of the faculty’s condemnation campaign, of which he was one of their primary targets, and also to his dissatisfaction with how the university handled the “Health, Wealth, and Happiness” event. When I solved the fiscal issue by bringing new donor funding to support the Lewis Center, the dean expressed no interest. Donor enthusiasm was contingent on maintaining the original intent and programming of the Lewis Center. By declining new funding and discarding the intent, Barrett’s new dean, in her first year on the job, dismantled a treasure at ASU.

Hundreds of students have expressed gratitude for what they’ve gained from our personal-development workshops and programs. They’ve told me it was the best thing that happened to them in college. Now it’s all gone, thanks to intolerant faculty and a university culture that retaliates against speech deemed to be unsafe. How sad.

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Here’s the dispiriting lesson of the “Health, Wealth, and Happiness” controversy that destroyed the Lewis Center at ASU: An institutional commitment to freedom of expression is not sufficient to protect intellectual diversity. President Crow states that ASU strives to “provide an environment that fosters the fullest degree of intellectual freedom and free expression,” but that phrase rings hollow when the campus culture undermines it. My experience suggests that the intentions of pro-liberty donors cannot be realized when classes are taught and grades given by professorial activists, or

when programs and grants are controlled by administrators hostile to intellectual freedom. Even if a school attempts to honor the terms of the gift, faculty can and may still subvert its implementation. If you are a donor, how confident can you be that your gift will have the effect you intend?

I also worry that the first and most fundamental lesson young people learn from such controversies is that success depends on keeping your mouth shut and sailing with the prevailing ideological winds. This education might prepare them for a future in corporate America, but it does not serve them well as citizens of a free society.

The current situation in higher education is not sustainable. College must prepare students for a career and for life, not scare them into silence and ideological complicity. Students, parents, and donors all want — and deserve — better. But for now, the state of free expression on campus remains grim.

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