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OPINION | COMMENTARY

I Paid for Free Speech at Arizona State

The university is firing me for organizing an event featuring Charlie Kirk and Dennis Prager.

By Ann Atkinson

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I thought that Arizona State University, my alma mater and employer, was different from other schools when it came to free speech. In 2011 the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression awarded ASU a “green light” rating for its written policies on freedom of expression. The university happily complied when FIRE suggested it adopt the Chicago Principles and protect the “free, robust and uninhibited sharing of ideas among all members of the University’s community.” The ASU Barrett Honors College has even been home to heterodox initiatives like the T.W. Lewis Center for Personal Development, where I served as executive director for the last two years.

But beneath ASU’s written commitment to intellectual diversity lies a deep hostility toward divergent views. The latest trouble started in February when the Lewis Center hosted Robert Kiyosaki, Dennis Prager and Charlie Kirk for an event on “Health, Wealth, and Happiness.” This nonpartisan program was part of a popular speaker series focused on connecting students with professionals who can offer career and life advice.

At the names of Messrs. Prager and Kirk, the faculty of ASU’s honors college were outraged. Thirty-nine of its 47 faculty signed a letter to the dean condemning the event on grounds that the speakers are “purveyors of hate who have publicly attacked women, people of color, the LGBTQ community, [and]

institutions of our democracy.” The signers decried ASU “platforming and legitimating” their views, describing Messrs. Prager and Kirk as “white nationalist provocateurs” whose comments would undermine the value of democratic exchange by marginalizing the school’s most vulnerable students.

The faculty protests extended beyond the letter. Professors spent precious class time denouncing the program. On Twitter they lamented the university’s willingness to allow donor input on campus events. Mr. Prager received a death threat, forcing municipal and campus police to enact extensive security measures.

The event’s topic made no difference to the faculty protesting it. The political views of Messrs. Prager and Kirk rendered both men *personae non grata* on any issue. The message to students was clear: Nuance is impossible in the presence of “wrongthink”; the offender must either comply or face sweeping castigation.

The university administration’s position on the event was no secret. All advertising about “Health, Wealth, and Happiness” was scrubbed from campus walls and digital flyers. Behind closed doors, deans pressured me to postpone the event indefinitely. I was warned that if the speakers made any political statements, it wouldn’t be in the Lewis Center’s “best interests,” which I interpreted as a threat.

I ignored their threats and the event was a resounding success—1,500 people attended in person, another 24,000 joined us online. There were no protests, no disturbances, and no traumatized students. But the faculty’s illiberal tantrum was devastatingly effective on two fronts.

First, the scare tactics worked on undergraduates. Many students told me they were intimidated by professors into not attending. Some would attend only if we promised that cameras wouldn’t face the audience. Students worried that attending or expressing interest in the event would hurt them academically. Grades for ambiguous things like “class participation” give professors the ability to punish students for their politics. The success of professors’ fearmongering was reflected in the audience, where older attendees outnumbered the students.

Second, the event cost its organizers dearly. Shortly after “Health, Wealth, and Happiness,” Lin Blake, the events operations manager at ASU Gammage Theater, was fired by ASU Gammage. Before her firing, Ms. Blake told me that she was “berated by ASU Gammage leadership for coordinating an event that did not align with the values of ASU Gammage.” And as of June 30, ASU will dismantle the Lewis Center and terminate my position as its executive director. Barrett Honors College leadership told me this is purely a business decision, despite my raising more than \$500,000 in the last year through the center.

(ASU Gammage executives didn’t respond to a request for comment about Ms. Blake’s termination.)

The biggest losers here are unquestionably ASU students, who have now been taught that success requires conformity rather than free thought. Additionally, the campus will no longer be able to benefit from the Lewis Center, which has helped countless students prepare for job interviews, build

professional networks, manage their finances, and master important life skills. Students, parents and community partners all loved it. It was tremendous. Soon it will be gone.

ASU claims to value freedom of expression. But in the end the faculty mob always wins against institutional protections for free speech. If a culture that promotes the free exchange of ideas isn't adequately fostered at "green light" rated ASU, is any school really safe?

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