

Let's Not Talk About Speech Codes In An Echo Chamber:

Speech codes on college campuses have long existed in some form or another, barring students from wearing clothing with curse words or sexually explicit language, or enforcing policies against the harassment of students or staff. However, in the era of increasingly aggressive rhetoric surrounding the 2024 election, conflict in the Middle East, and debates over immigration and aid packages, colleges and universities across the United States have been compelled to scrutinize their speech policies.

At their core, speech codes are designed to protect vulnerable groups or individuals from emotional or physical harm. They focus on any university regulation or policy that prohibits expression that would otherwise be protected by the First Amendment in society at large. [The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression](#) (FIRE) states that an example of such a policy would be a ban on "offensive language" or "disparaging remarks." Other speech codes may be content-neutral but excessively regulate the time, place, and manner of speech. College regulations of this type might restrict protests and demonstrations to one or two "free speech zones" on campus and/or require students to obtain prior permission to demonstrate.

In our modern society, where both social media and cancel culture are commonplace, the good intentions of speech codes are often misconstrued. Cancel culture is leading to the further polarization of groups of people due to a sense of fear, which causes people to engage in echo-chamber behavior. [Echo-chamber behavior](#) occurs when people only engage in conversation with others who share their viewpoints and beliefs. When people aren't talking to each other and sharing thoughts and ideas freely (and thereby learning from each other), then society becomes ruled by whoever shouts the loudest. Many speech codes prohibit speech based on content and/or viewpoint. This form of protection can become problematic when society becomes highly polarized by media issues, and both sides cannot agree on where to draw the line.

It is widely agreed that dangerous speech encouraging physical harm to others should be off limits. However, the issue of speech codes usually arises elsewhere. The conflict in the Middle East has sparked much debate over speech codes and who should set them. For instance, shortly after the October 6 attacks, [the University of Pennsylvania faced criticism](#) from donors for failing to comment on the violence and for allowing a Palestinian literary conference on campus in September. While one group may believe that comments accusing the other of violence are factual, the other group may consider them propaganda and potentially dangerous due to potential retaliation.

The Free Speech Center states that speech codes at public U.S. colleges and universities remain common features on campus despite federal courts consistently ruling that they violate students' First Amendment speech rights. [FIRE gave SMU a speech code rating of "yellow,"](#) indicating that there is at least one ambiguous policy that too easily encourages administrative abuse and arbitrary application. Out of the 248 school policies reviewed, SMU was ranked 98th in terms of various factors, including openness, tolerance, self-expression, administrative support for free speech, and campus policies.

I firmly believe that one cannot advocate for free speech and then ban others' speech simply because it does not align with one's beliefs. At a certain point, speech codes become a means to limit perspectives that differ from the louder or more popular group. To have a

productive and sustainable society, we must protect unpopular opinions or beliefs unless they directly threaten safety. As a journalist, I believe that speech should never be prohibited unless it poses a danger. If we as a nation implement widespread speech codes, we will only perpetuate the cycle of oppression that suppresses the very voices we aim to protect.