



eCOMMONS

Journal of Critical Scholarship on
Higher Education and Student
Affairs

Volume 2
Issue 3 *Special Issue: Students' Critical
Reflections on Racial (in)justice*

Article 17

2016

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Miranda Lee Houchins
The George Washington University

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Recommended Citation

Houchins, Miranda Lee (2016) "The “Free-Speech” Paradox: The Threat to Effective Student Protest," *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://ecommons.luc.edu/jcshesa/vol2/iss3/17>

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The "Free-Speech" Paradox:

The Threat to Effective Student Protest



Miranda Houchins
Undergraduate Student, George Washington University

Through the power of the Black student athlete, students at the University of Missouri recently triumphed in pressuring their President and Chancellor to step down. Student success like this is a rarity only made possible by a student faction that shapes the status of the institution (the highly-supported football team). More than 60 years after Brown v Board of Education, we continue to live in a desegregated, not integrated school system. This inequality transpires to race relation issues within America's higher education system. College, a so-called "great equalizer," in many ways still promotes White hegemony. Without a position of power to influence university status, minority student protests often become a politicized parody in order to maintain the White status quo within the bureaucracy of education.

For some individuals, White privilege works to legitimize fabricated dangers such as "the threat to free-speech" as a way to uphold a reputation as a good person instead of a racist. By depicting oneself as a fighter to the national treasure of freedom of speech, the intent of the alleged protector is overlooked.

Instead of exercising free speech to call for institutional reform, many frame recent protests as attackers of freedom of speech (Manne & Stanley, 2015). In this regard, historically oppressed people are yet again met with the political analogue of stonewalling, a paradox of propaganda. However, it is important to note the notion of free-speech does not protect the right to hate speech, which is often the underlying element many want to protect. With the exception of outliers, the innate "threat" that recent minority protests pose is the threat to take away the right to White privilege.

The student voice is rarely embodied by the defiant student who challenges institutional praxis. If it does, it is subdued inherited cultural belittling. When oppressed people speak up and challenge those in power — their right to speak may be permitted, yet their magnitude of knowledge is challenged due to institutionalized prejudice. For this reason, I've seen peers disregard dissenting voices as a minority of troublemakers, not as co-creators responsible for bettering an academic community. The way in which protestors express themselves become the focus of news cover-

age with the help of the stereotypical frame of angry black woman or man. Under these standards, people are forced to raise their voices in order to be discernible; but because of the "tone" of their speech all that is heard is a cacophony of disruption.

Claude Steele suggests the presence of "a self-system that explains ourselves, and the world at large, to ourselves. The purpose of these constant explanations (and rationalizations) is to maintain a phenomenal experience of the self — self-conceptions and images — as adaptively and morally adequate — that is, as competent, good, unitary, stable" (Steele, 1999, p. 373). Under this psychology of self-defense, White students and faculty would be considered members under the umbrella of White privilege. Since the group has benefited from practices of exclusion, and has (perhaps unintentionally) preserved "White entitlement," members will experience a serious disruption of their sense of self when confronted by their own injustice (Manne & Stanley, 2015).

to this tweet my intent was to ask whether candidates would say BLM, ALM or Both." Many felt by even posing that #alllivesmatter, the staffer invalidated all black GW students fighting for their equality. Black Lives Matter protestors have been targets by White supremacists at their own events and in "White-spaces" such as a recent Donald Trump rally. For that reason, a simple slip-up (even if it may have been innocent) raises the accusations of "dog whistling" against equality because the question does, in fact, work to belittle Black student activism on campus.

As the drought of diversity within America's K-12 education system dwindles on, stereotypical coverage of protests (and lack thereof) works to extinguish the fire of student equity from spreading further. The occasional narrative I am exposed to by affluent peers (from all races) is that the Black Lives Matter movement is "shouting and complaining about nothing." Once a perceived reality becomes endangered, racism imbedded innocently as a child reveals its ugly face.

The fact that the movement has helped to create hundreds of non-profits and organizing groups is left out of the news' narrative ultimately demotes the movement's legitimacy.

The collective agency of students has changed history — but I worry that the emerging narrative of student protestors is diminishing the likelihood that students will utilize protest as a force of change in the future. Through the debated enigma surrounding the "protection of free-speech," we cannot allow prestigious universities to fall back into their history of White supremacy. It's important to remember a school desegregation law came only to fruition once the Court decided a diverse educational experience would benefit Whites too. Without distancing the protection of White privilege from the "protection of free-speech" we will continue to abet our country's living history of suppression.



As a White student at The George Washington University, who has only been taught by White professors, I have seen the "free-speech" of student protest used as a medium to belittle both a movement and a people. Although I must give credit to the university's well-written response about "The GW White Student Union" Facebook page and the overwhelming social media support for Mizzou from students, the best example comes in a less-canned setting. During the recent democratic debates, a high ranking GW staffer live tweeted "How many say Both!?! #BlackLivesMatter & #AllLivesMatter #CNNDebate". After initial backlash, the staffer properly apologized and said "In reference

I ask you to question the "ally" paradigm that often surfaces when a student supports a movement that they are not personally connected to. Whether it is a race issue or reproductive right's issue, this sort of language implies that you (as a White person, for example) are merely outside helpers, rather than stakeholders, and I just don't see that as a reasonable depiction of reality. As Matt McGorry says "We can't pretend we live in a world where everything is even CLOSE to equal." I will never know the struggle that a person of color faces, but I do know I don't want to live in a society where justice is rationed. The stakes are too high for me, regardless of the skin color I inhabit.