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Free speech too small a game for higher ed

Your Turn

Mark Zupan Guest columnist

Robert Zimmer, a former president of the University of Chicago, passed away a few months ago. As president, he was justly proud of having tasked a committee on his campus, in 2014, to articulate the Chicago Principles.

The Chicago Principles focus on the importance of promoting freedom of speech on college campuses. Since the drafting of the statement, a hotly debated issue at many institutions of higher education and their governing boards is whether they opt to follow the University of Chicago's lead. To date, close to 100 higher education institutions in the United States have publicly adopted or endorsed the Chicago Principles.

While freedom of expression is important in higher education, Alfred University believes that giving this value such singular importance is playing too small a game. Organizations focused on freedom of speech tend to end up with speakers preaching to the choir because they too often attract like-minded individuals. One need only look at the echo chambers and polarization created by various media channels in our society to appreciate this point.

At Alfred University, our bedrock principle is inclusivity. We believe that fostering inclusivity matters the most to the success of individuals, organizations and nations. Freedom of speech and thought matter greatly but so do building the power skills of listening and learning to work with others with different backgrounds, viewpoints, and aspirations. Hence the primacy of fostering an inclusive community ensures that we realize the finest outcomes while fostering genuine compassion and respect. The success of the United States as a polity stems most fundamentally from the promotion of inclusivity.

Freedom of expression is a key amendment to our constitution through the Bill of Rights. However, our true "secret sauce" lies in our commitment to radical pluralism, to inclusivity – as writer Tom Friedman has so eloquently noted. We are at our best when we live our motto *E pluribus unum* and we stumble when we fall short of that lofty and deceptively simple ideal.

Alfred University prides itself on being inclusive from our start in 1836. We were the first higher education institution in the nation to make our curriculum fully open to female students. While Oberlin College was the first to admit women, we were the second, but unlike many other schools in the 19th century, we placed no restrictions on majors or the ability of students to speak publicly regardless of gender.

Our first class had 22 female and 14 male students, and all majors were open to all students, as was the ability to give public talks. Alfred University was also one of the first higher education institutions in the United States to admit African American and Native American students. The composition of the undergraduate class that we just welcomed to campus at the beginning of our University's 188th year attests to our steadfast commitment to build on our core value of inclusivity. They hail from 29 different states and 27 different countries. Over a third are members of historically underrepresented minority groups and nearly half are the first in their families

to attend college. In my office at Alfred University, hangs a treasured framed letter from 1903 written by Susan B. Anthony to a librarian of ours.

In the letter, Anthony promises to send a volume of her History of Woman Suffrage, so that every student at our university could access the complete set through our library's bookshelves when it comes to their "inevitable moment of writing a composition on the question of women's rights."

Anthony goes on to note: "*Alfred was one of the first places that I visited in 1852 and I have watched your institution with a great deal of interest ever since and I hope now, that your best friends, Mr. and Mrs. Allen [our second president and his faculty member/wife who Anthony was good friends with], are gone, it will proceed on the even tenor of its way. I do not suppose that the segregating of the sexes has ever been thought of in your college. It is pitiful to see how the University of Chicago with Dr. Harper at its head is setting an example of segregation [the University of Chicago adopted segregation by gender in 1902 citing class crowding due to a rapid increase in the percentage of female students]. Did you notice that rather than increasing his number of young men of the city and from the East, he is 700 short of as many as he had last year? I should think that would be a lesson to him; but none are so blind as those that will not see, so I suppose he will not charge the lessening of the number of students to his invidious action with regard to women.*"

Like all other organizations, Alfred University has had stumbles when it comes to inclusivity, stumbles that we have had to learn from. Committing to the promotion of inclusivity is akin to seeking to scale a mountain with no top. That said, we are committed to making the traverse when it comes to promoting inclusivity in the Alfred University community.

While our students have many opportunities to articulate their thoughts and discuss their ideals, because of our inclusivity there is diversity within the opinions expressed. Students learn from one another about different outlooks, which deepens their ability to empathize and understand perspectives other than their own.

In an inclusive environment, the freedom of speech becomes an opportunity to learn.

It becomes a place where people who have been less likely to have their voice heard become a part of the conversation.

Rather than an echo chamber, an atmosphere of respect is fostered and a force for positive change is created.

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