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Opinion

# The Misguided Student Crusade Against 'Fascism'

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This month, a handful of student protesters at the University of Oregon blocked me from delivering my state-of-the-university speech, one of my jobs as president. I had planned to announce a \$50 million gift that would fund several new programs. I ended up posting a recorded version of the speech online.

Armed with a megaphone and raised fists, the protesters shouted about the university's rising tuition, a perceived corporatization of public higher education and my support for free speech on campus — a stance they said perpetuated “fascism and white supremacy.”

I have nothing against protest. It is a time-honored form of communicating dissent. Often, the concerns students express very much deserve to be addressed. But the tactic of silencing, which has been deployed repeatedly at universities around the country, only hurts these activists' cause. Rather than helping people who feel they have little power or voice, students who squelch speech alienate those who are most likely to be sympathetic to their message.

It is also ironic that they would associate fascism with the university during a protest in which they limit discourse. One of the students who stormed the stage during my talk told the news media to “expect resistance to anyone who opposes us.” That is awfully close to the language and practices of those the students say they vehemently oppose.

Fundamentally, fascism is about the smothering of dissent. Every university in the country has history classes that dig into fascist political movements and examine them along very clear-eyed lines. Fascist regimes rose to power by attacking free speech, threatening violence against those who opposed them, and using fear and the threat of retaliation to intimidate dissenters.

By contrast, American academia is dedicated to rational discourse, shared governance and the protection of dissent. Historically, fascists sought to silence, imprison and even kill university professors and other intellectuals who resisted authoritarian rule. So the accusation that American universities somehow shelter or promote fascism is odd and severely misguided.

Undoubtedly, the term “fascism” has an effective anti-authoritarian ring to it, so perhaps that is why it is thrown around so much these days. But from what I can tell, much of what students are protesting, both at the University of Oregon and elsewhere, is the expression of viewpoints or ideologies that offend them and make them feel marginalized. They are fed up with what they see as a blanket protection of free speech that, at its extreme, permits the expression of views by neo-Nazis and white supremacists. I am opposed to all these groups stand for, but offensive speech can never be the sole criterion for shutting down a speaker.

The students' own tactics reveal just how malleable the concept of offensiveness can be. For example, the word “fascism” has deep emotional connotations for me. It's the reason for great suffering in my family. Two generations ago, members of my extended family were thrown into concentration camps and murdered in Eastern Europe during the Holocaust.

So, when students accuse me of leading an institution that harbors and promotes fascism, it offends me. But does that justify my censoring their speech? Clearly the answer is no.

Without the freedom to express ideas, even those that offend, we cannot challenge the status quo nor move society forward. But student protesters can still change and reform institutions. In 2015, I had been president of the University of Oregon for all of three months when protests erupted around the country over the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. A group called the Black Student Task Force organized a protest right outside my office. I invited the students in for a discussion, and although the matters we discussed, about systemic racism and educational opportunity, were emotionally charged, we established a respectful dialogue. More important, the discussion led to change.

The University of Oregon engaged in a searching and difficult historical examination of racism at the school. We doubled the number of black faculty members, created new programs to enroll more black students, started an African-American lecture series, and raised \$1.6 million to build a new black student cultural center. We also invested in symbolic change by removing the name of a former Ku Klux Klan leader from one of our residence halls and replacing it with the name of an illustrious black alumnus.

Educators and students must learn from each other, and nothing is more important to this exchange than free speech. Our future as a university, and more broadly, our future as a nation, depends upon our willingness to hear voices different from our own and engage in meaningful discussion.

We in academia have a lot of big issues to tackle. One such topic — what to do about speech that offends vulnerable populations and how to protect speech and safety at the same time — presents a difficult challenge, but that makes the issue that much more important.

As with any important discussion, emotions can run high. But the only way to create change is to grapple with difficult issues. Nothing can be gained by shutting them out.

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