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## Before You Know It, Your Speech Could Be Offensive

By [Cathy Young](#)

Those who charge that modern-day liberalism has become fundamentally illiberal toward speech and ideas that challenge its own dogma could ask for no better illustration than the recent events at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, a bastion of the academic left.

On March 11, the Republican Club at UMass hosted Don Feder, a conservative journalist and former columnist for The Boston Herald, addressing the controversial subject of hate speech and hate crimes. Feder believes that legislation which singles out hate crimes with special penalties, rather than treating all violent crime equally, amounts to unconstitutional punishment of bad speech or bad thoughts. He also disputes the notion of a hate crime epidemic in America. The event was, in part, the Republicans' response to the controversy over the case of Jason Varnell, a black UMass student who faces charges for stabbing two white men and has received strong support on campus for his claim of self-defense against a racist attack. (About two weeks after Feder's appearance, one of the men Varnell stabbed was acquitted of violating his civil rights.)

A group of left-wing students announced their intent to protest Feder's appearance. The campus police then demanded the organizers pay an added \$444 for security, nearly tripling the costs to the club.

It's bad enough to place a burden on unpopular views by requiring student organizations to shoulder extra costs for hosting controversial speakers. It's doubly outrageous when, even with the extra costs, the controversial speech is still silenced.

While Feder was not shouted down or physically threatened as some other speakers have been, a video posted on YouTube shows that the protesters were blatantly disruptive from the start. They laughed raucously when Feder was introduced as an "author and intellectual." The announcement that no protests or disruptions would be tolerated during the speech was greeted with open jeers.

As Feder began to speak, the protesters hissed and hooted. At one point, a group of them noisily turned around their chairs to face away from the podium. Finally, a woman in the audience interrupted Feder, rising to shout out a statement about the murder of a transgendered African-American woman. Feder asked the police to escort her out; from the video, it appears that she walked out on her own, to the cheers her fellow protesters, and even paused to wave to her friends and yell a derogatory comment to Feder.

Finally, as the disruptions continued, Feder cut his speech short and left the podium.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a group that champions civil liberties in academia, took up the case on behalf of the Republican Club, asking UMass-Amherst to refund the extra security fee.

On April 9, the day The Boston Globe featured an op-ed about the dispute by FIRE vice-president Robert Shibley, UMass associate council Brian Burke wrote to FIRE that the refund would be made, though denying any impropriety on the part of the college.

Ed Blaguszewski, UMass executive director of news and media relations, took the same position in his letter to the Globe published a few days later. He claimed that UMass is committed to "open exchange of ideas," that "the police handled the situation in the room without difficulty, which included removing one person," and that it was Feder's choice to stop speaking. However, in the video, which was put up by a supporter of the protesters' - and which includes the incident with the heckler in its entirety - the police are seen standing by idly.

Of course, freedom of speech does not protect speakers from criticism. But disruption and harassment are another matter. The students who objected to Feder's ideas could have engaged him in forceful debate during the question period. (Who knows, they might have found that his ideas were not quite as worthless or demeaning as they assumed from the get-go.) They were also within their rights to hold up signs and posters expressing their objections. It is worth noting, however, that some of the signs captured in the video - "Abolish hate" and "Hate speech leads to hate crimes" - supports concerns that hate crime legislation ultimately targets thoughts and speech. This is particularly worrisome since some definitions of "hate" are broad enough to include opposition to affirmative action, abortion or same-sex marriage.

A genuine liberal would be embarrassed by these actions. But in some quarters, intolerance of dissent is now a cause for self-congratulation. When Feder remarked that he had spoken on numerous college campuses and had never experienced anything of the sort, one student could be heard shouting, "Go UMass!"

This is not to say that the right does not have its own hypocrisies and double standard when it comes to free speech. In 2003, when New York Times reporter Chris Hedges criticized the war in Iraq in a commencement speech at Rockford College in Illinois and was forced off the podium by protesters who booed loudly and disconnected the microphone twice, some conservatives such as Washington Times editor-in-chief Wesley Pruden were fairly supportive of the hecklers. More recently, concerns about protests and other security issues have led to the cancellation of controversial left-wing speakers like former Weatherman William Ayers and radical professor Ward Churchill. Much to FIRE's credit, despite having the reputation of a right-of-center group, it has consistently supported free speech in all these cases.

Most of us probably regard some speech and some speakers as so far beyond the pale of civilized discourse that there is no point in debating them, only in branding them unacceptable. But, however satisfying such a stance may be, it could be only a matter of time before the speech beyond the pale is your own.

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