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Subject: [FacStaffDiscuss] Statement from CERE faculty re: Laura Kipnis Freedom Project visit and aftermath

To: Faculty-Staff Discussion <facstaffdiscuss@wellesley.edu>

To: Wellesley Community

From: Faculty on Commission for Ethnicity, Race, and Equity (CERE)

Re: Laura Kipnis visit and aftermath

3/20/17

Over the past few years, several guest speakers with controversial and objectionable beliefs have presented their ideas at Wellesley. We, the faculty in CERE, defend free speech and believe it is essential to a liberal arts education. However, as historian W. Jelani Cobb notes, “The freedom to offend the powerful is not equivalent to the freedom to bully the relatively disempowered. The enlightenment principles that undergird free speech also prescribed that the natural limits of one’s liberty lie at the precise point at which it begins to impose upon the liberty of another.”

There is no doubt that the speakers in question impose on the liberty of students, staff, and faculty at Wellesley. We are especially concerned with the impact of speakers’ presentations on Wellesley students, who often feel the injury most acutely and invest time and energy in rebutting the speakers’ arguments. Students object in order to affirm their humanity. This work is not optional; students feel they would be unable to carry out their responsibilities as students without standing up for themselves. Furthermore, we object to the notion that onlookers who are part of the faculty or administration are qualified to adjudicate the harm described by students, especially when so many students have come forward. When dozens of students tell us they are in distress as a result of a speaker’s words, we must take these complaints at face value.

What is especially disturbing about this pattern of harm is that in many cases, the damage could have been avoided. The speakers who appeared on campus presented ideas that they had published, and those who hosted the speakers could certainly anticipate that these ideas would be painful to significant portions of the Wellesley community. Laura Kipnis’s recent visit to Wellesley prompted students to respond to Kipnis’s presentation with a video post on Facebook. Kipnis posted the video on her page, and professor Tom Cushman left a comment that publicly disparaged the students who produced the video. Professor Cushman apologized for his remarks, but in light of these developments, we recommend the following.

First, those who invite speakers to campus should consider whether, in their zeal for promoting debate, they might, in fact, stifle productive debate by enabling the bullying of disempowered groups. We in CERE are happy to serve as a sounding board when hosts are considering inviting controversial speakers, to help sponsors think through the various implications of extending an invitation.

Second, standards of respect and rigor must remain paramount when considering whether a speaker is actually qualified for the platform granted by an invitation to Wellesley. In the case of an academic speaker, we ask that the Wellesley host not only consider whether the speaker holds credentials, but whether the presenter has standing in his/her/their discipline. This is not a matter of ideological bias. Pseudoscience suggesting that men are more naturally equipped to excel in STEM fields than women, for example, has no place at Wellesley. Similar arguments pertaining to race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and other identity markers are equally inappropriate.

Third, faculty and administrators should step up in defense of themselves and all members of the Wellesley community. The responsibility to defend the disempowered does not rest solely with students, and the injuries suffered by students, faculty, and staff are not contained within the specific identity group in question; they ripple throughout our community and prevent Wellesley from living out its mission.

In solidarity,

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