

Free Speech Revisions to CU Invite Controversy

When the founding fathers guaranteed citizens the right to free speech they never anticipated the rapid evolution of speech that would later amount to new types of problems in the modern world. Now, centuries later, controversies over what exactly the First Amendment should include still exist. Universities around the country now recognize hate speech as a protection of the first amendment, but some choose to eliminate speakers that promote hate speech on campus. CU Boulder is not one of these schools.

“We will invite speakers to campus that don’t impose our values so we can discuss and debate ideas,” said Phillip DiStefano, the chancellor of CU. “We want to teach students how to think, not what to think and one way to do this is to bring in opposing views.” Distefano addressed free speech initiatives at his State of Campus speech on Oct. 17th 2018.

According to the CU Boulder website, “policies defining discrimination and harassment must also recognize the constitutional protections for expressive activities.” The first amendment protects hate speech along with disagreeable speech. CU tends to attract liberal viewpoint to campus, meaning that conservative speakers invite controversy to campus. Past speakers such as Ann Coulter and Charles Murray evoked protests on campus against the rhetoric that some have viewed as an attack on certain groups of individuals.

The CUSG Director of Student Engagement, Jessie Bixler, who advocates for students on campus, believes in fostering a safe place for students on campus. “We should be promoting intelligence, but more importantly we should cultivate compassion and I don’t see how inviting hateful speech on campus promotes compassion,” said Bixler. “We need to develop more than just good students, we need to develop good people overall and I don’t see how tolerating hate speech plays to that mission.” She said that she personally saw how it only took one incidence to make students feel unwelcomed on campus, and how hate speech played a role in many not feeling included on campus.

“We have a desire to connect our community and promote a welcoming and inclusive environment within CU,” said Distefano. CU has promised to foster diversity and promote diversity and inclusion. This 2018 school year represents the most diverse undergraduate class yet with eight percent of undergraduate students being a minority. CU is also diverse in viewpoints.

While many believe that CU Boulder is a primarily liberal environment, some students on campus believe that more conservative viewpoints should be represented. “Although some people believe that liberal speakers represent the majority they don’t represent everybody” said Maddie Benson, a Sophomore who is a CMC student at CU. “I see people expressing free speech around campus through protests and by handing out pamphlets but if you look closer you will realize that these expressions only represent one viewpoint.”

Benson stated that while she did not believe in attacking certain groups through hate speech, she felt as if certain speech could be seen as subjective and that students should be able to hear the opinions that don’t always resonate with their beliefs.

It is unclear how defining free speech laws will impact future speakers. Notable past speakers include prominent figures such as Joe Biden, Eleanor Roosevelt, Henry Kissinger, and Anderson Cooper. CU continues to bring in big names on campus and Distefano has made it clear that no speaker is too controversial for CU.

Story Memo

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Internet Sources:

<https://www.colorado.edu/cwa/about/history/notable-past-participants>
<https://www.colorado.edu/free-expression>

Other Sources:

Chancellor's speech

Overall this assignment went well. I got my idea from the chancellor's speech and wanted to investigate more into the issue. I think that getting my sources went smoothly because many people wanted to talk to me about free speech initiatives on campus and CUSG was very eager to talk to me. I also got multiple interviews from students at the UMC but I specifically choose this one student because she represented a different viewpoint and made the paper seem less biased toward a specific agenda. I think that I did a very good job finding different points of view and researching more on this issue. I think that I could have done a better job digging up people who saw these controversial speakers because I felt like that could have added an interesting point of view. Overall I learned that sometimes other stories will lead you to find a bigger story on campus and that you should always pay attention to everything your sources say because they could be important for multiple stories. I also think that this is a very simple concept but still very relevant on campus, so sometimes I believe reporting is just listening to the people and seeing what they are most passionate about.