



COMMITTEE ON  
EDUCATION AND  
THE WORKFORCE

## COMMITTEE STATEMENT

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### **Opening Statement by Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-NC), Chairwoman, Committee on Education and the Workforce Hearing on “Examining First Amendment Rights on Campus.”**

Good morning, and welcome to today’s hearing. I thank our panel of witnesses and our members for being here today as we talk about freedom of expression on college campuses and how postsecondary institutions are and are not respecting individuals’ First Amendment rights.

Here at the Education and Workforce Committee, we talk a lot about the importance of all education. Education has the power to change lives, and every form of instruction that focuses on developing a student’s skills is valuable, whether that skill is physical or intellectual.

We’ve focused on the skills gap, and the skills gap is a major reason we have more than six million open jobs in this country. But there’s one skill that I believe is one of the most sought-after skills in the workplace and in the classroom, and that skill is critical thinking.

All of education, but especially postsecondary institutions, have a duty to develop students’ problem-solving skills. By encouraging students to engage in civil discourse and challenge their own perceptions, they sharpen their analytical skills so that they are prepared to lead the workforce once they graduate. But many institutions are taking deliberate steps to curb speech, and are thus extinguishing students’ critical thinking at a vital stage in their professional — yes, professional — development.

University campuses should function as a marketplace of ideas for students to exchange knowledge and share their varied and distinctive viewpoints. When freedom of thought, expression, and association are stifled on campus, the basic rights of students and staff are irreparably undermined.

This is not a partisan issue. In a Gallup-Knight survey of students published earlier this year, every single demographic favored an open learning environment that permits what may be deemed as offensive speech by some over a campus environment that puts limits on speech deemed offensive.

Furthermore, the majority of respondents reported they feel that speech is being stifled on campus.

So why are some institutions placing limits on freedom of expression? There has been no shortage of news stories about some speakers being turned away from college campuses, informal censorship occurring in classrooms, and the meteoric rise of the heckler's veto. As a result, postsecondary institutions are functioning more and more like ideological echo chambers devoid of diverse thought.

We have seen the creation of so-called safe spaces at some campuses where students can feel "safe" from speech that upsets them. Conversely, we have seen the development of free speech zones and other schemes designed to limit free expression and shield students from ideas and concepts they may find uncomfortable or challenging.

The Bill of Rights affirms certain unalienable rights, chief among them the freedom of speech. The First Amendment sets the United States apart from other nations, and our incredible individual liberties are the envy of people across the world. The freedom of thought and expression are the cornerstone of our democracy, and it is crucial that we safeguard this power and privilege.

In the Gallup-Knight poll I referenced, the majority of college students (64 percent) still view their First Amendment rights as secure. However, that number has fallen by almost 10 points from 73 percent in the previous year's survey. As the postsecondary landscape continues to evolve, it's important that we take a close and hard look at how students' rights and freedoms are upheld on campus and at the role of the First Amendment in postsecondary education.

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