

NEW HAVEN REGISTER

Debate at Yale Rep in New Haven Examines Free Speech on Campus

By Anna Bisaro, *New Haven Register*

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NEW HAVEN >> The atmosphere on college campuses has changed, a Columbia University professor argued before an audience full of Yale students and New Haven residents Tuesday. And that change has created spaces in which free speech is not extinguished, but threatened.

A majority of the audience agreed.

After a debate hosted by [Intelligence Squared](#) U.S., a nonprofit that provides free online access to debates held across the country on issues facing society, 66 percent of the audience left convinced that free speech is threatened on college campuses. The event was held at the Yale Repertory Theatre.

John McWhorter, a professor of linguistics at Columbia, argued with Wendy Kaminer, a writer and lawyer, that free speech is now being threatened on college campuses because of language codes and policies that punish those who use any form of speech deemed hateful or derogatory, no matter how minor.

McWhorter and Kaminer discussed instances from colleges and universities all over the country in which professors have been fired for comments made in the classroom that students were unhappy with and protested against. They talked about times when student speech has been limited by university policies, such as when students have been forced to remove “All Lives Matter” signs from dorm room doors.

When students call for professors to be fired based on something they said, they are threatening free speech, Kaminer said.

“Students have a right to demand what they want to demand,” Kaminer said. “But it shows an intolerance for free speech ... and a desire not to hear opposing views.”

Debate moderator John Donovan encouraged debaters to steer clear of talking about the events at Yale University last October and November, when an email from a professor about Halloween costumes [sparked student protests and even the resignation of that professor](#). But it was difficult to ignore Tuesday night.

“The act of protesting is not a denial of free speech, it is the exercising of free speech,” Jason Stanley, a philosophy professor at Yale, said. “Free speech is alive and well on university campuses.”

“Free speech is not threatened by students voicing concerns about social justice issues,” Stanley added.

A student from Yale later asked whether Stanley felt there was a line that professors could cross in which one should be worried about being fired or students calling for their resignation based on something he or she said. Stanley answered that he did not worry about that in his classes or work.

Shaun Harper, also arguing against the motion that free speech is threatened on college campuses, agreed with Stanley. Harper, now executive director at the Center for the Study of Race & Ethnicity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania, said he has worked at three different college campuses and has never once felt like he could not speak his mind for fear of punishment from administration or the student body.

Harper also said that while it is not ideal for members of fraternities at college campuses to say that only pretty, white girls should be allowed at parties, an instance like that should start a discussion among peers, not call for a student’s speech to be limited.

In addition to the Halloween costume emails this fall, Yale had other issues of alleged racist speech when members of a [fraternity on campus reportedly said they only wanted white girls at their party](#).

Much of the discussion during the debate focused on hate speech against minorities. For McWhorter and Kaminer, racist comments limit free speech, while Harper and Stanley said that being called a racist does not equate to being told to stop talking.

“When someone is told they are racist ... in America in 2016, it is practically equivalent to calling them a pedophile,” McWhorter said.

In response, Stanley argued they were not even discussing free speech at all during the debate.

“(This debate) is about racism and anti-racism and free speech doesn’t have anything to do with it,” Stanley said.

A survey was taken at the beginning of the debate and 49 percent were in support of the motion that free speech is threatened on college campuses and 27 percent polled as against that motion and 24 percent were undecided. At the end of the debate, the support had jumped to 66 percent, and undecided fell to 9 percent. Those against fell to 25 percent.