

# Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech, by Keith E. Whittington

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## Book Review: *Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech*

Keith E. Whittington. (2018). *Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 213 pp, \$24.95.

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The academic library, like the university at large, plays a key role in the dissemination of knowledge and ideas. Librarians should acknowledge that these ideas will not be agreeable to all members of campus communities or the public at large. For example, consider the recent criticism and praise that the Toronto and Vancouver public library systems faced when they refused to cancel scheduled presentations by controversial public figures. How can academic librarians balance freedom of expression—a constitutionally guaranteed fundamental freedom for Canadians—and objections to promoting, preserving, or disseminating disagreeable knowledge and ideas that are brought to our attention?

Keith E. Whittington is a Professor in the Department of Politics at Princeton University. He completed a BA in Government and Finance and a BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration) at the University of Texas at Austin. He also holds an MA and a PhD in Political Science from Yale University. Whittington's four-chapter book, *Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech*, offers a concise, nuanced argument in support of free speech on university campuses. While Whittington's argument is grounded in US constitutional law and history, a substantial portion of his thesis is philosophical in nature and allows for an application to Canadian post-secondary and legal contexts on freedom of expression.



*Speak Freely* opens by arguing that free speech aligns with the core mission of the university: to generate and disseminate knowledge. Whittington expertly illustrates and explores tensions between free speech, universities, and the populist and sometimes anti-intellectualist sentiments of American culture. To Whittington, free speech on campuses should be the manifestation of an inclusive intellectual community composed of anyone willing to engage in learning. This concept is further developed in the third chapter, where Whittington maps out the theoretical space that free speech occupies: trigger warnings, safe spaces, hate speech, forms of protest, non-academic speakers and the role of student groups, and academic freedom of faculty in the context of the mission of the university. Whittington closes his book by addressing the worry that “universities sometimes struggle to sustain the kind of diverse intellectual communities that would best facilitate the advancement and dissemination of knowledge” (163). This comes as a result of free speech being naturally or purposely muffled through both administrative and academic action, and Whittington calls upon universities to avoid becoming “complacent in their studies and blind to their deficiencies and biases” (164).

The academic librarian will appreciate how Whittington surgically focuses on connecting free speech with the university’s mission of developing, exploring, and questioning knowledge. Whittington argues that academic departments cannot prevent students from exploring ideas that are not endorsed by or do not align with the research with which a scholarly community opts to engage. For example, Whittington notes that university administrators who stifle the presentation of content for fear of controversy ultimately undermine the core mission of the university; freedom of speech must prevail in order to foster an intellectual community where all viewpoints may be shared in order to contribute to the spirit of knowledge development. Allowing students to explore controversial topics does not mean that faculty or administrators endorse this content—they are instead contributing to the spirit of knowledge development where students may decide for themselves whether they support a particular viewpoint.

Readers may vehemently disagree with Whittington’s suggestion that there is space to allow hate speech on campuses. This is, however, a nuanced argument that is not made in support of hate speech. Whittington instead argues that hate speech functions as an opportunity for learning in higher education where “instructors leading a classroom discussion have a duty to correct students who make baseless or misguided arguments. The very goal of instruction and research is to expose flawed arguments for what they are” (93). Ideas that are hateful, Whittington argues, may be voiced on the basis of free speech, but need not be accepted or endorsed. While Whittington bases his argument in the first amendment to the Constitution of the

United States, his argument is applicable to Canadian contexts as legal requirements are beside the point: “free speech is important to universities because it is constitutive of the institution, not because it is imposed as a legal restraint by an outside force” (29).

Whittington’s book could have benefited from an exploration of inclusivity, privilege, and free speech on campuses. Whittington’s argument assumes that all campus community members have equal access to speaking podiums and opportunities to share their points of view. It is often the case that those with access to resources—monetary or otherwise—enjoy easier access to freedom of speech on campuses. Whittington relies heavily on John Stuart Mill’s proposal that an inclusive intellectual community be composed of anyone willing to engage in learning, and no one should be excluded from intellectual discourse “because of who they are or what they believe” (47). Whittington’s argument, however, fails to acknowledge that the intellectual communities that both he and Mill have in mind are not equally representative of all standpoints; while this trend has been changing somewhat, privilege associated with socioeconomic background, gender, and ethnicity continues to play a causal role in the composition of these communities and the extent to which a truly diverse representation of standpoints is voiced within them. The complexities and limitations of the book’s argument could have been addressed by exploring or acknowledging the privilege associated with the ability to exercise free speech.

It may be tempting to enter hesitatingly into an encounter with a book by a self-professed “Texas populist” (ix) who argues that free speech is better preserved on university campuses without a hate speech exception. It is only natural to harbour a suspicion that the argument will disregard voices of the marginalized while buttressing podiums that are easily attained by the privileged. This, however, is *not* that book. Whittington crafts a thoughtful argument that freedom of speech must be awarded to all campus community members to ensure that all voices are heard; to stifle one voice is to stifle all voices. The plethora of examples offered by the author—spanning an entire spectrum of political ideologies—serves to lay a fertile ground for the argument against censorship of any kind in academia and the wider university context. Whatever your own agreements and disagreements with the book’s arguments happen to be, Whittington proposes a thoughtful, reasoned, and clearly stated case for free speech in institutions of higher education that academic librarians will appreciate when considering their own positions on freedom of expression.