

# Colleges Are Cracking Down on Free Speech in the Name of 'Inclusion'

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American University's new, draconian policies on campus protests and activism show that DEI, Inc. is a dead-end.

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opinion



“Recent events and incidents on campus [have made Jewish students feel unsafe](#) and unwelcome.” That’s how the President’s Office at American University [justified](#) sweeping changes to the university’s policies governing student organizations and campus protests for the spring semester.

These new rules make a mockery of the university’s [“commitment to free expression and civic engagement.”](#) And they point to the fatal flaws of a [Disney-fied](#) vision of campus “diversity” and “inclusion” where everyone feels entitled to be [“welcomed, respected, supported and valued”](#) at all times.

Framed as upholding the university’s core value of “inclusivity,” the revised regulations ban all indoor protests and mandate that all student clubs—as well as all posters for university-sponsored events—be “welcoming and build community.” Those who violate these directives are subject to disciplinary action, while [student organizations](#) that [refuse to comply](#) risk losing their official status and funding.

AU’s new policies are a response to controversies that have gripped college campuses nationwide in the wake of Hamas’ Oct. 7 terrorist attack, including skirmishes about Israeli hostage posters, confrontational student protests and polarizing student groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). Citing safety concerns and community belonging, many schools, including Columbia, Cornell, and Lehigh University, have tightened the rules governing events, demonstrations, and student organizations—but AU’s changes are some of the most drastic.

To “ensure compliance” with the requirement that student clubs and organizations “will be welcoming to all students,” AU has already started the hiring process for a new “leadership position in student affairs.”

Picture this administrator’s duties: attending a [Pride at AU](#) meeting to make sure that evangelical Christians would feel at home there; combing through the materials of the College Republicans, lest campus Democrats feel excluded; or, encouraging the leaders of the Women in Science club to expand their purview to include men.

Student clubs are organized around shared interests, beliefs, and identities. They will no longer be genuine affinity groups if AU administrators are going to intervene with a program of heavy-handed surveillance.

The actions taken by American University represent the triumph of a safety-and-security model of learning that prizes the avoidance of psychological harm above all else. This educational approach is based on the notion that some ideas are so dangerous—so damaging to individual psyches, so detrimental to society at large—that they must be banished from classrooms and quads altogether.

It has gained such widespread influence, thanks in part to what we call [DEI, Inc.](#) This is the conventional campus diversity, equity, and inclusion framework that treats education as a product, students as consumers, and diversity as a public relations enterprise that needs to be managed from the top down.

DEI, Inc. has helped to erase meaningful distinctions between physical safety and psychological discomfort. That poses a real problem when it comes to protecting free expression, especially in terms of student activism. Political protests are designed to make you uncomfortable, to grab you by the lapels and, in the [words](#) of the late [Harry Belafonte](#), “snap you out of your indifference!”

AU students seem to have a better grasp of this elementary fact than the AU administration. “The basis of a protest is disruption,” freshman Haider Zaidi observed at a recent campus demonstration where student speakers [called](#) for the new restrictive policies to be repealed. In a letter to President Sylvia Burwell, members of the AU SJP chapter pointed out that the administrative directives “not only target SJP, but all of student speech and thought at AU.”

To be clear: When Jewish students, or any other students, say that they have been targets of discrimination or harassment based on their ancestry or national origin, colleges and universities have an obligation to take the allegations seriously—and, if they are verified, discipline the perpetrators, accordingly.

While standing firm by this commitment, we must also acknowledge that some colleges and universities are invoking the fight against antisemitism to crack down on criticism of the state of [Israel](#). Over the past several months, we have seen too many textbook examples of students, administrators, trustees, donors, politicians, and other higher education stakeholders confusing condemnations of Israeli government policies with anti-Jewish bigotry.

In our view, even the [most contentious assertions](#)—that Israel is a [“settler-colonial state,”](#) an [“apartheid state”](#) or guilty of perpetrating [“state-led genocide”](#)—are clearly directed at Israel as, well, a state. They are not instances of egregious [antisemitism](#), as many prominent [figures](#), including 412 members of Congress in a [House Resolution](#), have claimed.

Writing in the 1960s, Ralph Ellison made the following observation:

“The diversity of American life is often painful, frequently burdensome, and always a source of conflict but in it lies our fate and our hope.”

Hear, hear! While colleges and universities have attempted to impose a happy-clappy, frictionless model of diversity in the name of “community” and “belonging,” Ellison reminds us that the default setting for a pluralistic, democratic society is conflict.

Students are alert to the hypocrisy. Colleges and universities “love to plaster our faces on posters and promotional material,” Yale law school student and Yalies4Palestine member Chisato Kimura [said](#) in a recent interview. But they struggle to accept that “if you have diverse faces on campuses, you’re also going to have diverse voices and opinion.”

To the extent that colleges and universities enshrine “inclusion” as a sacrosanct value, which runs roughshod over [academic freedom](#) and [free expression](#), higher education is in a world of trouble.

How are students meant to develop the skills to navigate the complex, often challenging, realities of living in a multicultural democracy if they can’t exercise their rights to protest? (At AU, they don’t even have the freedom to design their own posters without the administration looking over their shoulders!)

Under these chilling conditions, colleges and universities can’t fulfill their most vital educational missions—to teach critical thinking skills and to help students become informed, engaged citizens.