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An advertisement for the Toshiba Portégé M700 laptop. On the left, a black laptop is shown with a silver pen resting on its lid. To the right of the laptop, the text "Portégé® M700" is written in a large, bold, red font, with "from the laptop expert." in a smaller red font below it. In the top right corner, the Toshiba logo is displayed in red, with the tagline "Leading Innovation" in black. Below the logo is a red button with the text "EXPLORE NOW" in white.

May 16

Honorary Degrees, Free Speech and Respect



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Many faculty members and students at Washington University in St. Louis plan to turn their backs today when Phyllis Schlafly receives an honorary doctorate. They and many others [are furious](#) that the university is honoring a woman who has spent her career crusading against protections for women as well as for promoting the teaching of disproved theories that attack evolutionary science.

The university has largely framed the issue as one of free speech and the free exchange of ideas. [Statements from the university](#) have noted that many degrees have gone to people who have been “part of the broad public discourse on vital issues of our times — whether or not the majority of those within its community agree with the views expressed.” Further, they have noted the wide range of views of past degree recipients. In [another statement](#), the university noted that it was honoring Schlafly because she has had “a broad impact on American life” and the resulting controversy over her views “in many cases have helped people better formulate and articulate their own views about the values they hold.”

As critics have pointed out, one could be a pretty terrible person and meet those criteria. But in short, the university is wrapping the decision to honor Schlafly around the principles of the free exchange of ideas on college campuses. Just as professors or campus speakers wouldn't be denied platforms for having views that offend some people, the university has argued, honorary doctorates should go to a wide range of individuals. Or should they?

Most of those protesting the Schlafly degree say that they would not object to her giving a lecture on the campus. Some might picket outside, but they would never challenge the right of a controversial figure to express her ideas, they say. An honorary doctorate is different from a lecture, they argue, because it is an honor, because it takes place at graduation, and because a doctorate — as the highest degree a university can award — conveys a sense of institutional endorsement.

The debate raises anew a question that is centuries old: Should universities award degrees that haven't been earned? And are there circumstances under which some people should not be receiving such an honor?

The views of those who monitor freedom of expression in higher education may surprise some. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has defended the speech rights of many in campus disputes, including a number of individuals from the right. But Greg Lukianoff, president of FIRE, said that Washington University would not be violating principles of academic freedom if it uninvited Schlafly and that Northwestern University did not do so when it this month [rescinded an invitation](#) for Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the former pastor to Sen. Barack Obama, to receive an honorary degree.

“At a university, the idea is that you let different ideas fight it out in the market place of ideas,” Lukianoff said, and that’s why FIRE would defend the right of Schlafly to speak on campus. But “granting an honorary degree fits into the same category of any other award and awards are inherently subjective,” he said. If a university, having extended an invitation for an honorary degree, decides that “on second thought, that’s not the best idea,” that’s the university’s right, Lukianoff said.

“It’s very different from censorship,” he said. Schlafly and others have a right to a platform to speak when they want to give talks on a campus that opens itself up for such events. “No one has a right to an honorary degree,” he said.

The blog [Free Exchange on Campus](#)

— not known for getting many links from the Eagle Forum — on Thursday suggested that the Schlafly honor and resulting protests may be good for all involved. “There are some who feel that such controversial characters on the dais or behind the podium at commencement ceremonies are a distraction to the celebration of the achievements of recently-minted graduates,” said a blog post. “While there’s certainly a case to be made that this sort of sideshow detracts from the main event, it’s more important to note that the decision to honor Ms. Schlafly has touched off the sort of vigorous debate that is part and parcel of the college experience. Members of the campus community have used this opportunity to have a spirited engagement about Schlafly’s views and actions as a public figure. And that is unequivocally a good thing. Washington University should be free to award honorary degrees to whomever it chooses — even if some doubt that a recipient’s achievements merit such an award. Likewise, students, faculty members, and others are free to disagree with those choices and to vigorously express that disagreement. So long as all sides are able to make their points heard on the issue, the experience will be a net positive.”

Robert M. O’Neil is a First Amendment advocate who is a former president of the University of Virginia and the University of Wisconsin System and directs the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression. Generally, he said it would raise free speech concerns to rescind an invitation for an honorary degree based on the views of the prospective honoree. At the same time, he said there are some questions to be considered that may vary at different institutions.

The first question is “how does the university describe the award?” Washington University is stressing that the person had an impact — positive or negative. But others use different criteria, which may point to flaws in some selections. The University of Cambridge has been awarding such degrees for 500 years, and used them early on to win favor from royalty. [Its standards](#) require “conspicuous merit” by the recipient. O’Neil has an honorary degree from Indiana University at Bloomington, where he was formerly a vice president, and which awards degrees to people with a connection to the university and the state. If a university with such a policy awarded a degree to someone without any Hoosier connections, that might raise issues. “You have to look at what they are saying about the honor,” O’Neil said.

The second question to ask, O’Neil said, is about harm to those receiving degrees: “In what sense are the interests of those who object to Phyllis Schlafly affected by the award of the degree?” On this question, he said, “it doesn’t seem to me that their degrees or the conferral of them are demeaned or undermined or deleted by the fact that that she is receiving one.”

The various objections being raised, O’Neil said, would have been more appropriately considered during the process of selecting the honorees. And that points to another concern raised by critics at Washington University. Although the award to Schlafly shocked the campus, administrators have stressed that the committee that works with the trustees on selections had student and faculty members. The problem is that some of those involved are saying that they didn’t really have the opportunity to object.

A letter from students on the committee, [posted on an alumni Web site](#), states that while the students “accept partial responsibility” for the invitation, Schlafly was invited without a discussion of her controversial views, students were forced to vote up or down on an entire slate (and couldn’t single out objections to Schlafly), and one student who tried to object experienced “hostile opposition.”

Washington University is of course not the only institution to be criticized over honorary degree selections or embarrassed by the choices. The University of Massachusetts at Amherst is currently moving to revoke a degree given Robert Mugabe, president of Zimbabwe, before he became known as a despot. Many universities routinely award one or more degrees to those who have given major gifts or have the potential to do so — and some of these individuals take their doctorates to prison. [Dennis Kozlowski](#) received an honorary doctorate from the University of New Hampshire in 2000, before he was convicted of stealing hundreds of millions of dollars from Tyco, the company he led.

And there are debates every year about the appropriateness of [awarding doctorates to celebrities](#) — with at least some of the debate seeming to depend on how A-list the celebrities are. So when Middlebury College awarded an honorary doctorate to [Meryl Streep](#), there were no complaints. But [Tony Danza’s honorary doctorate](#), from the University of Dubuque, did result in some snickers.

Many in academe believe that honorary doctorates — including awards to those of decidedly non-academic backgrounds — are just an inevitable part of commencement season. They aren’t — although institutions without them some face their own challenges.

Most years at the University of Chicago, honorary degrees go only to scholars — nominated by Chicago professors. The only exceptions are presidents and board chairs of the university. An in-house article at Chicago in 2000 boasted of the approach: “Chicago’s approach to awarding honorary degrees is unlike its peer institutions’ degree-granting process, in that the university does not honor actors, ambassadors, presidents or monarchs unless they meet stringent requirements for scholarship.”

The University of Texas at Austin doesn’t generally award any honorary degrees and the only exceptions since 1935 have been for sitting presidents, vice presidents or first ladies of the United States. The select members of the group are: President George H.W. Bush (1990), President Lyndon Baines Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson (both 1964) and Vice President John Nance Garner (1935). So despite Garner’s [famous quotation](#) about the low value of the vice presidency, he did get something of value — a UT degree — out of it.

Rice University has a strict policy against awarding honorary degrees. When Rice approached Bill Cosby about serving as commencement speaker in 2001, he was disinclined, citing the lack of a degree to go with the speech. Cosby appeared the next year, and the university gave him — in lieu of a degree — a special award to honor his service to education.

The founder of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, William Barton Rogers, called the awarding of honorary degrees “literary almsgiving ... of spurious merit and noisy popularity.” So from MIT’s founding it has not awarded honorary degrees. Rogers picked up his distaste for honorary degrees at the University of Virginia, where he was a geologist before moving to MIT. Thomas Jefferson disliked the practice, and that has settled the matter ever since.

Cornell University is another institution in the small group to avoid honorary degrees. This academic year, officials at Cornell’s medical college proposed that the policy be changed so that it could award honorary degrees, but the university’s Faculty Senate [nixed the idea](#) on Wednesday. Charles Walcott, dean of the faculty at Cornell, said that “the main reason given for opposition

was that it had been a source of pride that Cornell does not give honorary degrees.”

By the time commencement is over today, some at Washington University may wish they had a similar tradition.

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
<http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/05/16/degrees>.*

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