

Copied Nov. 20, 2018

In Response to the “Chicago Statement” Petition

November 15, 2018

To the Williams community,

Recently, a petition has circulated throughout the faculty urging the College to adopt a statement released by the University of Chicago in 2015, which claims to defend the right to “free speech and free expression” on college campuses. The authors of the Williams petition assert that “while there is an understandable desire to protect our students from speech they find offensive, doing so risks putting down legitimate dialogue and failing to prepare our students to deal effectively with a diversity of opinions, including views they might vehemently disagree with.” We, the undersigned, take grave issue with the premises of this petition and the potential harm it may inflict upon our community.

We are at once angered by the context in which this petition has emerged and highly critical of its content. This process is not only engaged against Williams College’s Mission and Principles, but also against those of the petition itself. Not allowing students into the discussion and circulation of the petition limits the potential for conflicting viewpoints and is thus completely antithetical to a free speech premise. According to the college’s Mission Statement, “Faculty members invite students to become partners in the process of intellectual discovery.” We see none of this. With increasingly visible violence towards those most marginalized by our society, why is this discussion happening now? “Free Speech,” as a term, has been co-opted by right-wing and liberal parties as a discursive cover for racism, xenophobia, sexism, anti-semitism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and classism. The creation of this petition at Williams cannot be separated from those dehumanizing associations. Nor can it be separated from a national pattern where certain amendments are upheld and protected at all costs and others are completely denigrated, ignored, and targeted. Take the privileging of the 2nd amendment over the 14th amendment, for example. Mirroring this harmful prioritization, Williams’ sudden and urgent need to protect “free speech” over all other issues for students and community members is evidence of white fragility, ideological anxiety, and discursive violence. This petition and the Chicago Statement are purely semantics and posturing. Why can’t we actually have a campus-wide discussion on this issue, one that is not dominated by conservative

and white faculty? Can this instead be an opportunity to take a critical eye to how free speech is constructed and weaponized at institutions like Williams?

We would like to draw attention to specific elements of the petition. The use of “controversy” in the piece is oversimplified and reductive. The petition prioritizes the protection of ideas over the protection of people and fails to recognize that behind every idea is a person with a particular subjectivity. Our beliefs, and the consequences of our actions, are choices we make. Any claim to the “protection of ideas” that is not founded in the insurance of people’s safety poses a real threat – one which targets most pointedly marginalized people. An ideology of free speech absolutism that prioritizes ideas over people, giving “deeply offensive” language a platform at this institution, will inevitably imperil marginalized students.

Liberal ideology asserts that morality is logical— that dehumanizing ideas can be fixed with logic and therefore need to be debated. However, oppression is the result of centuries of real emotional and material interests, and dehumanization cannot be discussed away. In truth, a liberal framework for “rational debate” rests upon a cognitive hierarchy that says intelligence equals morality and discussion equals good actions. The reality is that the academy has a dark history of enacting racism. Topics like eugenics, once debated as “civil rational discussion,” have now been acknowledged as indefensibly racist frameworks. Finally, those who dictate what gets to be debated are generally overrepresented folks from backgrounds of privilege. Therefore, this petition has grave potential to further silence the voices of people of color, queer people, disabled people, poor people, and others outside the center of power.

And while the University of Chicago statement says that students “may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject,” the issue is that these are *not* views we reject; they are views that reject us, and our very right to speak/breathe. The UChicago Statement, in failing to see this, has rejected our right to counter-protest, to “interfere.” Thus, our rights protected by the 1st amendment are eradicated by a petition that claims to support “free speech.” This document does not promote free speech: it punishes it. In a time when members of Congress on both sides of the aisle are asking for activists to be tried under the Patriot Act, and counter-terrorism legislation has continued to increase world governments’ abilities to violently deny the right to peaceful protest, the College cannot support and thereby strengthen such absolute, reckless, and dangerous policies.

We are also skeptical of the “free speech” debate more broadly. The faculty petition is based on the false premise that the free dissemination of viewpoints means that all speech has an equal chance of being heard. Simply letting all speech be spoken does not, in practice, accomplish the petition’s stated goal of ensuring that different and diverse viewpoints, particularly those of marginalized people, are heard. Ultimately, power determines whose speech is given space and taken seriously. By putting resources and publicity behind certain speakers, we affirm their thoughts and ideas, bolstering their reputation with the weight of our institution’s academic legitimacy. When it comes to the actual choice of who comes to speak or how we otherwise engage in discourse at Williams, we must curate those speakers carefully, because ultimately all speaking engagements on campus are curated. Giving one person space/time to speak on campus means that another person is not given that space/time. We have to become attuned to the absences that accompany people’s presence on campus.

Whom does this campus prioritize, and whom does this statement truly aim to protect? John Derbyshire is a self-proclaimed “racist” and “homophobe” who was invited to speak at Williams by Uncomfortable Learning in 2016. He wrote an article proclaiming, among many other atrocious, untrue things, that “the mean intelligence of Blacks is much lower than for whites” and adamant advice like “[do] not attend events likely to draw a lot of Blacks.” Adam Falk disinvited him to campus, but a free speech absolutism policy, like the one in this petition, would have limited the President and allowed Derbyshire to spew homophobia and anti-Black racism on campus. To quote Aiyana Porter at last week’s Black Student Union town hall, “John Derbyshire literally said that Black people are not humans. I’m not going to consider that in my classroom....Who are we okay with making uncomfortable? Why are we so driven to making those particular people uncomfortable? If we are so insistent on making them uncomfortable, then we at least need some institutional support to get through all of the discomfort that you are thrusting upon us.” Williams College continually fails to support its most marginalized students, staff, and faculty members, despite claiming to have a deep commitment to “diversity.” Cheryl Shanks’ letter to the editor states that “To sign on to this statement is not to reject safe spaces. The College should allow for, and even provide, safe spaces. In fact, it does.” As noted by dozens of students at the BSU town hall and the phenomenal letter released this week by Professors Love and Green, this is simply untrue: many students with marginalized identities feel as if the College does not provide adequate support for them. Students of color feel tokenized in

entries, CSS has a history of racist actions, queer faculty of color are subjected to racism and homophobia/transphobia, minority students lack autonomous space, etc. If we are to engage in this discussion, let us take a critical lens to the ways that “free speech” has been leveraged to silence dissent, not strengthen it.