

## America's College Promise

Zach Batson  
*Guest Contributor*

Free community college tuition for eligible students is the centerpiece of President Obama's America's College Promise proposal. It is the upshot of a larger concerted strategy to improve community colleges, a strategy that contributes to the president's comprehensive goals for education.

In a press release on January 9, the president detailed his \$60 billion (over 10 years) cost-sharing program to succeed where the Truman Commission failed. Federal funding would cover three-quarters of the average cost of community college. States that already have programs that offer more than the remaining balance would be able to reinvest the extra funds.

States would also be able to choose whether to participate. An estimated 9 million students would benefit from the program if all states participated. The president's proposal also seeks to double the existing investment in federal Pell Grants and expand education tax-credits, among other things that are meant to augment the free-tuition program.

The proposal also includes requirements that community colleges would have to meet in order to be eligible for federal aid. Schools would be expected to either offer programs that are occupational training, or offer

classes that are fully transferable to a four-year institution. For students to receive financial benefits, they would need to maintain a 2.5 GPA.

The suggestion that community college tuition should be free is not a new one. It has a strong historical precedent in the Truman Commission of 1947. The Commission viewed free tuition as the foundation from which other educational improvements might more easily follow. In December 1946, philosopher and Commission member Horace Kallen considered his work "as a deduction from the democratic position in the field of education, a certain conception of a standard of educational living. We can't realize it all at once. Every step in the realization is going to be a fight, just as every step in the raising of the standard of living is going to be a fight."

The Truman Commission was criticized for many of the same reasons that the president's current proposal is being criticized. Deficit hawks are naturally concerned about new expenditure. Many worry that the money could be put to better use in K-12 schools, others that private four-year institutions could not compete with the appeal of free public education, and others that the job market could not support the greater number of graduates. Some finally say that tuition is already cheap, and that it is not the reason many cannot afford community college.

Tuition only represents a small portion of the debt accumulated by full-time community college students. The standards and requirements that actually aim to improve colleges are unfunded mandates pressuring states to work miracles with little to no help. The labor pool, however, stays the same size whether more college degrees are awarded or not, and it is clear that jobs increasingly require some sort of technical or advanced education. We cannot make all of college free all at once, but that does not mean we should not take the first step.

The president's proposal is based off of similar programs in Tennessee and Chicago where a first round of graduates are about to receive their diplomas. We will have to wait to see how effective these programs are. Of course, even if these are successful, the same methods may not yield the same results throughout the country.

Ultimately, this proposal represents a practical effort to move toward free education for all, as much as one historical moment can bear. Perhaps it is not enough. It might be mostly a political punch line for Democrats in 2016. Crucially, though, it is not the only object of the president's goals for education, only the most obvious one. It is an American thing. It is also a necessary thing: to dream of being educated. Let us strive to make that dream a reality for all Americans.

## Hate Speech Laws: Coming Soon to America?

*Will Swett | Staff Writer*

Over the past quarter century, a disturbing movement targeting so-called "hate speech" has emerged in the West and has gained traction in the public and private spheres. Across Europe, particularly France, legislation prohibiting "hate speech" has been active for decades, forcibly silencing the stupid and misinformed.

Recently, a drunken Frenchman praised the Kouachi brothers' attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, telling police officers, "I hope you will be next." French authorities sentenced the man to four years in prison. Although the statement was intentionally inflammatory and insensitive, the overblown reaction to his words signals the apparent end of freedom of speech in the West.

When the state enters the realm of ideas and opinions, speech and expression become limited to the standards of the mob. By evaluating and sanctioning the controversial beliefs of individuals through legislation, a state separates speech into prohibited and permitted areas, redefining it in terms of its social impact.

The line between believing something controversial and being intolerant, however, is not cut and dry. This means that the political community determines the distinction based on

the beliefs of its people, and disciplines based on the severity of the resulting emotional angst. In cases that challenge social or political values, beliefs, or principles, the plurality determines whether such acts are justified expression or an "incitement to discriminate" based on ethnicity, nationality, race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation.

Despite the Constitution's First Amendment protection of free expression, the possibility of hate speech legislation entering American political discourse represents a very real threat to individual freedom. The attack on free speech has already begun in this nation, led by colleges and universities—the institutions we trust with educating the greatest minds and future leaders of our country. Although the restriction of hate speech is based on principles of tolerance and pluralism—once the values underlying the right to free speech—more and more it seems that Western nations are developing a taste for forced silence and obligatory conformity.

While most people still enjoy extensive freedom of expression, hate speech accusations within scholarly institutions have made what was once a nearly absolute right less dependable for anyone daring to espouse controversial social, political, or religious views.

Critics of religion have recently come under fire by those who wish to prohibit speech that might incite violent attacks.

The ability to criticize religious faiths, once a key tenet of the Western intellectual tradition, has been abandoned in favor of a more harmonious society. This social harmony would only be a façade, however, because the forced compliance comes at gunpoint by the government.

When the EU parliament mandated religious hate speech laws in 2008, officials declared that there is “no right to religious insult” and measures must be taken in order to “preserve social peace and public order.” Therefore, the “increasing sensitivities” of those who act violently in reaction to religious criticism must result in the restriction of potentially harmful speech. The policy prioritizes the feelings and comfort of religious believers over the right to criticize.

The West has a proud history of “religious insult” that challenged the established social order and profoundly affected the shaping of our societies. The Enlightenment, for example, launched waves of attacks on the established hierarchy, particularly the Catholic Church. European nations tried to censor the speech of the Enlightenment *philosophes*

because the ideas being expressed were detrimental to social harmony. The distinction between what speech is positive and what speech is hateful represents a departure from the ideals and values of the Enlightenment.

The attack on hate speech puts comfort over free expression. Individuals should denounce any hateful speech privately, but any institutional restriction on expression threatens the ability of an individual to hold controversial beliefs. In order for opinions to develop and progress, we must allow people to express wrong opinions without risk of persecution so that the opinions may be challenged and refined. The use of hate speech should result in a conversation, not an attack. Any law restricting hate speech only gives weight and authority to the reactions of a violence-prone minority.

We should be protecting all speech through the promotion of national conversation, as opposed to just protecting the “right” speech. Instead of violence or institutional punishment against hate speech, the correct reaction to words should be more words, and not incarceration.

## Our Campus Discussions

Phil Parkes | *Staff Writer*

With a recent trip to a Democracy Matters meeting on campaign finance, I completed the final leg in a three-stop journey to familiarize myself with different clubs on campus. It pained me to see the hostility towards minority conservative positions. What began as skeptical curiosity and attendance at a roundtable discussion on climate change activism transformed into a mission to find common ground with different political views. At this meeting in particular, it was students supportive of more democratic elections and campaign finance reform. The meeting culminated in several unexpected lessons that I believe provide an explanation of the benefits of healthy political dialogue.

The biggest mistake made when individuals advertise opportunities for “more dialogue” and “conversations” is that they confuse the result with the experience. Free and open discussion help students understand each other and hopefully find common ground. But the most beneficial kinds of interaction may be difficult. Striving to understand people who hold fundamentally different views on the Constitution, for example, requires personal fortitude beyond letting someone challenge your beliefs. It means possibly accepting that others have a point to make, and walking away without convincing them otherwise.

One student at the Democracy Matters meeting expressed the desire to “equalize” elections by eliminating private campaign spending entirely. He tossed around the possibility of new amendments to the U.S. Constitution like options on a dollar menu. A feeling of incredulity surged into my head. “These ideas exist? People are *this* liberal?” I asked myself. Up until then, I had placed conservative ideas on a pedestal. I had developed my political

beliefs in isolation and in doing so, had denied myself the opportunity to consider my ideas in relation to others. Thankfully, commentary from other, more moderate, participants balanced the discussion, and I was able to contribute constructively. This much-needed dose of humility allowed me to shift my focus. Instead of mounting a hotheaded rebuttal in an attempt to destroy an idea, I could simply learn about it. I learned that there are many passionate individuals like me on both sides of the political aisle who want to make a difference for good.

Unfortunately, this learning cannot take place if “conversations” aren’t actually designed to challenge any preexisting beliefs. Take the well-intentioned but one-sided Islam panel discussion, which transformed its time in the spotlight into some sort of healing process for offended students, designed to “clear up misconceptions,” as if fundamentally different perspectives on the situation could not possibly have existed in the first place. When differences of opinion do exist, however, and in this case I think evidence can be assembled to show that they do, participants leave even less prepared than before for any meaningful discussion on the topic. As has been well documented by my colleagues at *Enquiry*, the intolerance perpetrated by one-sided discussions and debates stifles the interaction everyone at these debates claims to want.

I appreciate and benefit immensely from the willingness of faculty to share their time and expertise with students. And I agree with Cesar Renero’s recent suggestion in the *Spectator* to hold “fortnightly debates” on campus. Students like Cesar see a silver lining in the dark cloud of political discourse from this past semester. Beneath every harsh disagreement and apparently irreconcilable difference lie students who are passionate about current events but lack the will to meet others

halfway. Cesar suggested more debates, but I think they already take place, and they begin and end with students themselves. At Democracy Matters meetings, *Enquiry* meetings, Hamilton College Republican and Democrat meetings and La Vanguardia meetings, students sacrifice their precious time to talk about important issues. Combined, they take place almost every night of the week.

Yes, it might offend you that a libertarian wants to abolish Medicaid, or annoy you that some “Womyn” view life through a rigid ideological lens. But with just a small dose of humility and good faith, students can challenge ideas with civility and walk away enriched by knowledge they would probably never look up or obtain on their own.

At Democracy Matters, Hamilton Professor of Government Phil Klinker spoke persuasively on the current rise of polarized politics in the U.S. We may never shed political polarization. Fortunately, however, we may learn the most from those we agree with least. With humility, an open mind, and good faith, I will be attending a few new meetings this week to do just that. I hope you’ll join me.

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