Respecting Free Speech in Our Community

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Recently I attended several programs at UC Irvine. One was a Muslim Student Union-sponsored talk entitled 'The World Without Israel.' During the talk, some students dressed in black and white Palestinian scarves, walked up behind the speaker and, in opposition to the speech, unfurled banners advertising the MSU event as an 'Al-Qaeda Training Camp.'

These student-sponsored events were sandwiched between the 'Daniel Pearl Dialogues for Muslim-Jewish Understanding,' a presentation by Iranian human rights advocate and Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, and the UCI Model United Nations High School Conference.

I bring up these different events in part to emphasize that the free right to free speech remains intact for everyone at UCI.

I also want to highlight the latter events as powerful examples of dialogue and discussion across lines of deeply embodied differences that might otherwise got lost in the fallout from the student-sponsored demonstrations. Those at the Daniel Pearl dialogue can attest to the incredible power that came from the authentic dialogue between two men who could so easily have become enemies rather than colleagues and co-sponsors of peace.

UCI is, however, legally prohibited from either proscribing or prescribing the content of speech, as long as speakers conform to campus policies and applicable laws.

We have been steadfast in carrying out our responsibility, both because we are legally bound to do so and because we remain convinced that the right of free expression is fundamental to the academic freedom at the heart of American higher education.

It is no coincidence that U.S. universities produce some of the most groundbreaking and innovative research in the world and continue to draw students and faculty from almost every country. Were we not so open to diverse views and values, the intellectual depth and rigor required for the best research and teaching would not find rich enough ground to take root.

That said, I want to remind our community that when we talk about free speech what we really mean is protected speech protected by the Supreme Court, to be exact.

Think of it as a line drawn around certain types of speech across which no one can come to silence you.

This difference between free and protected speech may seem like mere semantics, but if you read the newspapers, spend time online or watch everything from Fox News to Jon Stewart, you can appreciate that there is a very real difference here.

This line of protection seems to be drawn too narrowly for some and too broadly for others.

Like some national boundaries, the protected speech line has moved over the years, in both directions.

And the tug-of-war continues.

As the year draws to a close, I want to thank all those who have worked to establish and maintain dialogue across lines of difference. As you know, it is far more difficult to listen and respond respectfully to opposing views than it is to simply ignore or shout over them.

To those who have spoken provocatively and with intentional anger, we are legally bound to protect your right to express yourselves.

Any harassment of individual campus members, provocation of immediate violence, obstruction of the academic life of the campus or violations of campus policies or relevant laws will be met squarely with administrative and legal consequences.

You are not legally required to be wise in your speech.

I would ask you to be thoughtful and mindful about what you say and how you say it.

I ask you to use your right to free speech to facilitate dialogue and mutual understanding.

Unfettered speech is so much more powerful when accompanied by respect for others.