Hi Everyone – It is great to see all the returning alums, from the classes of 2011 and 2006. I am Robert Kraynak, professor of political science and the director of the Center for Freedom and Western Civilization. I have been teaching here at Colgate for 38 years, mostly political philosophy and general education. I have taught several generations of Colgate students – I came here in 1978, and some of my first students from the 1980’s have now sent their children here, and they have taken courses with me. I call these children of former students, my ‘grand-students.’

I hope to continue teaching here for another 10 or 20 years, challenging Prof. Balmuth and Prof. Aveni for most blue-book final exams ever graded – this will not be easy. They started back in days of an eight course teaching load, so I am going to have to continue to age 85 to catch up. This upset a recent dean of the faculty, who a few years ago offered incentives for old folks like me to retire. He sent out a letter with financial incentives to retire, and I replied with a sly remark, “Not dead yet.” I still love teaching and scholarship, so I hope to continue for quite a while longer. So please send me your children when the time comes, and I hope that these ‘grand-students’ will also be able to learn some political philosophy from Prof. Kraynak.

Well, that’s enough for the jokes. Now I would like to turn to a serious topic, which I hope will not upset your dinner. My topic is the campus climate which everyone is discussing. In particular, I would like to talk about the intellectual and political climate – meaning, the questions surrounding diversity of ideas or intellectual diversity, and concerns about the censorship of ideas and speakers. This relates to the state of liberal arts education, and the impact it has on the intellectual and political climate of the country, today and in future.

Let me begin with some examples from the news that are high-profile and sensational, that have raised questions about what is taking place on our college campuses. It is difficult for people to know what to believe, and I offer these remarks as my observations on the current situation.

On the one side, we hear about minorities feeling excluded by campus culture or demeaned by programs neglecting their intellectual interests; we also hear about sexual assault and lack of attention to victim’s rights. These are serious issues that have received considerable publicity, and they need to be investigated and aired with transparency for the safety and well-being of all concerned.

On the other side, we also hear criticisms of universities for fostering a climate that is too sensitive to feelings, too focused on creating ‘safe spaces’ for students in order to protect them from opposing viewpoints or challenging ideas. Sometimes the ideas themselves have been called ‘micro-aggressions’ and demands are made for ‘trigger warnings’ in classes for ideas and books that might upset students. The atmosphere of ‘political correctness’ is also cited as creating an atmosphere of censorship or self-censorship, and for causing some high-profile
speakers to be banned or dis-invited from campuses after protests from students and faculty. Some of the people involved are quite surprising, as you may be aware.

Among entertainers – Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock, and Bill Maher are comedians who have said they do not wish to perform on college campuses anymore because their jokes are considered offensive to sensitive students.

Among leading political figures – there are numerous speakers who were disinvited, or withdrew after protests: Condoleezza Rice, secretary of state under George Bush (withdrew from Rutgers), Christine LaGarde, IMF director (dis-invited from Smith), Ray Kelly, NY city police chief (shouted down at Brown), Ayaan Hirsi Ali Somali-born political activist and now US resident (dis-invited from Brandeis).

Let me go back to the comedians: An invitation to Bill Maher from UC Berkeley ignited protests, and a petition to prevent him from speaking was signed by 2500 students and faculty for insulting Islam; eventually, the president of the university over-rode the protests and Maher gave the commencement address (The Guardian, Oct. 2014). When Chris Rock was asked about the attempt to ban Bill Maher, Chris said in an interview:

“I love Bill, but I stopped playing at colleges, and the reason is because they’re way too conservative … Not in their political views – it’s not like they’re voting Republican – but in their social views and their willingness not to offend anybody. Kids raised on a culture of ‘We’re not going to keep score in the game because we don’t want anybody to lose.’ Or just ignoring race to a fault. You can’t say, ‘that black kid over there.’ No, you have to say, ‘it’s the guy with the red shoes.’ You can’t even be offensive on your way to being inoffensive.’ “ (Vulture.com/2014)

Another example: Former NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg gave commencement speeches at Harvard last year and this year at the U of Michigan in which he strongly criticized the new campus climate of avoiding difficult ideas or viewpoints that might be considered offensive:

“The fact that some university administrations now bow to pressure and shield students from these ideas through ‘safe spaces’ and ‘trigger warnings’ is in my view a terrible mistake. The whole purpose of college is to learn how to deal with difficult situations, not run away from them … And one of the most dangerous places on a college campus is a safe space, because it creates the false impression that we can insulate ourselves from those with different views. We can’t do this and we shouldn’t try … In the global economy and in a democratic society, an open mind is the most valuable asset you can possess.’ (Bloomberg.com, April 30, 2016)

Another recent critic, Nicholas Kristof, a journalist for the NY Times, just wrote an editorial entitled, “A Confession of Liberal Intolerance” (May 7, 2016):
“Universities are the bedrock of progressive values, but the one kind of diversity that universities disregard is ideological and religious conservatism. We’re fine with people who don’t look like us, as long as they think like us. OK, that is a little harsh. But consider George Yancey, a sociologist who is black and an evangelical [Christian]. He said, “Outside of academia I faced more problems as a black [person] … But inside academia I face more problems as a Christian, and it is not even close … Kristof concludes with the warning: “If universities lose intellectual diversity … they die. And this is what has been happening since the 1990’s.”

You may ask: Is this a true or accurate account of our universities? And, if it is true, how did it happen?

One can cite statistics showing a huge imbalance of ideological viewpoints among university faculty and scholars, but that does not get us to the qualitative problem of intellectual intolerance.

A deeper explanation is offered in an Atlantic Monthly article that has received a lot of attention, “The Coddling of the American Mind” (Sept. 2015) by Greg Lukianoff. He argues that the new view of education emphasizes “emotional well-being,” and this has shifted the focus from critical thinking emphasizing evidence, argument, debate to “emotional reasoning” emphasizing subjective expression of feelings and personal identities. Lukianoff also cites a change in the Department of Education’s interpretation of civil rights discrimination: In 2003 the standard for discrimination was speech that was “objectively offensive” to a “reasonable person”; since 2013, the standard was broadened to include verbal conduct that is simply “unwelcome.” The changes give legal support for emotional offenses.

But you may ask: Do these attitudes really affect the campus climate of liberal education today, at Colgate and other places?

In my experience in the universities over the last 40 years, they do: We have lost the ideal of a “legitimate debate” in which both sides or all sides are given a fair hearing because certain viewpoints are considered off-limits or beyond the pale. It is nearly impossible to discuss many topics on campus without the presumption that there is only one acceptable viewpoint – for example, Islam, immigration, abortion, marriage, multiculturalism, climate change, feminism, the Bible, Western civilization, the Republican party, and of course, Donald Trump. In fact, one reason so many academics missed the rise of Trump was the inability to even fathom people supporting him, especially people from the disenfranchised white working classes: How many academics know an unemployed coal miner, a NASCAR driver, or a street cop? Another major issue totally missed by academics due to ideological blinders was – the end of the Cold War; it was simply assumed that the communist system could not be rolled back, since it was part of progressive history. And of course, everyone missed the rise of Islam after the Cold War because it was assumed by secular liberal academics that religion was a dying force in the modern world. And even today, it is hard to get a fair hearing for Samuel Huntington’s book,
“The Clash of Civilizations” – whether you agree with it or not, it is a major work that needs a legitimate debate. And, of course, the rise of nationalism in Russia and Europe and the possible British exit from the EU – these possibilities are almost unthinkable for those with a certain view of progressive history.

In my own classes, I have found that it is harder and harder, for example, to teach the Lincoln-Douglas debates in a way that makes the debate plausible to students. And it is more difficult to teach the classics of Western culture in a way that gives them a fair hearing rather than treating them as the prejudices of ‘dead-white-males’: This makes our culture more and more shallow by depriving us of the timeless wisdom of classical and Biblical thought.

So, it is not only difficult to get a hearing for ideas that do not fit the politically correct, progressive mold of thinking; but the suppression of serious alternatives has consequences for how we view the world and how we live our lives.

For my final thoughts, I would like to go a little deeper, and ask: What is the cause of the underlying blind-spot of the progressive bias in liberal arts education? I would trace it to the influence of two philosophers on the intellectual climate of today, two German philosophers who in many ways seem opposed but have been combined by modern intellectuals – I mean Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx.

From Nietzsche, we get the idea that Truth is not an objective standard that reason can discover in the cosmos and man. All claims of truth are merely subjective, and all values are relative to the individual or to the historical period in which they arose. Hence, there is no foundation for values beyond the will to power of the people who assert them. There are only “perspectives” that reflect subjective expressions of the will. But if nothing is really true, it follows that rational discussion is meaningless: There is no Truth, there is only Power. I believe that this Nietzschean insight is the source of today’s emphasis on subjective feeling and identity which undermines rational discourse in education.

But, Nietzsche’s insight is only partially adopted today. It is watered down and made democratic and egalitarian by adding Marx’s idea of equality as found in a universal classless society. This combination is odd, since Nietzsche’s idea of the will to power was harsh and elitist, although he thought it was noble: it would produce a world where the strong would dominate the weak because there was no such thing as truth, or reason, or justice, only power. Nietzsche’s insights are selectively used by intellectuals today to discard reason and to tear down traditional values, but they are inconsistently combined with the view that all subjective expressions of value have equal validity – without any need to justify them. And so we have Nietzsche and Marx together, producing the equality of all subjective opinions that shapes the intellectual climate of our times.
Well – I suppose that is enough philosophy for the evening. It is a long story about how the ideas of these two German philosophers came to dominate our American and European universities. You can read about in The Closing of the American Mind, by Alan Bloom (1987). His book shows how we arrived at the strange situation of our universities today where those using the rhetoric of ‘openness’ and ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusiveness’ have created a new kind of intolerance that shuts down rational debate on issues that violate the sense that all are equally entitled to subjective expression without the need for rational justification. In this way, the liberal arts have become illiberal, and diversity has become a pretext for intellectual conformity. My fear is that the great ideal of Truth through rational discussion is fading from our universities.

Well, I hope I not upset your digestion or ruined your dinner. I would like to leave you tonight with the challenge of restoring the great ideal of the quest for Truth through rational discourse, including all points of view (liberal, conservative, and radical) to our universities.

Perhaps we can look at the Colgate seal on the back wall of the field house, and be inspired by our Colgate Motto: Deo ac Veritate – for God and for Truth:

Is that motto just a quaint slogan of a bygone era, or is still an ideal for today?

Think about it, and get back to me with your thoughts.

Thank you and good evening.

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