

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

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Opening Statement
Rep. Val Demings, Ranking Member
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Affairs

Joint Hearing on “Challenges to Freedom of Speech on College Campuses”
Subcommittees on Healthcare, Benefits, and Administrative Rules and Intergovernmental
Affairs

July 27, 2017

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you Chairman Jordan and Ranking Member Krishnamoorthi:

I grew up in Jacksonville, Florida. My mother was a maid and my father, a janitor. In spite of their lack of material wealth, they gave me everything they had to support me and prepare me mentally, spiritually, and physically to succeed. I am the youngest of 7 children, but the first in my family to go to college. My parents’ life lessons helped guide me in college, when it was clear that some did not want me there; when I joined the police department, when women and other minorities were still trying to find their way; and even here in the United States Congress.

I have taken 3 oaths in my life time. One as a young police officer in 1984; one when I was sworn in as Police Chief and the 3rd when I was sworn in as a member of the 115th Session. In each oath, I swore that I would protect and defend the Constitution of the United States against ALL enemies, foreign and domestic. I have taken each oath very seriously. As a law enforcement officer, I had several occasions to provide security for many groups while they exercised their first amendment rights. Groups like the Klu Klux Klan and the Neo Nazi movement. But I was there providing much needed protection, and if someone had tried to harm them, I would have risked my life to protect them. Not because I agreed with their speech, but because I agreed with their right to speak. Their right as guaranteed by the first amendment.

I appreciate this opportunity to shine a light on the real clear and present danger facing colleges and universities around the nation. The problem is not high profile speakers like Ann Coulter. The clear and present danger is the increase in white supremacist hate groups on campuses and the targeting and harassment of students because of their religion, race, gender, and sexual identity.

For the 2016 to 2017 school year, the Anti-Defamation League reported that “students, faculty, and staff on 110 American college campuses were confronted by 159 separate incidents of racist fliers and stickers.”

Along with the rise of white supremacist hate groups, an increasing number of incidents of anti-Semitic, racist, and other hateful expressions that target and harass students is occurring on campus. The Southern Poverty Law Center reported that in ten days alone after last year’s election, there were 140 incidents of hate bias attacks on university campuses.

More recently, on May 1, 2017, at American University, bananas, tied with nooses, were hung across the campus after the school elected its first African-American student government president, Taylor Dumpson. Now, I was proud to hear of the election of Taylor because it demonstrates our progress as a nation. But, the words “AKA Free” were written on the bananas, referring to a predominantly African-American sorority, of which Taylor is a member. Taylor was also subjected to a cyberbullying campaign by a white supremacist group on social media. The Federal Bureau of Investigation is currently investigating these unprotected, illegal expressions and speech Taylor was subjected to as a hate crime.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask that a written statement from Taylor about the hate speech attacks and harassment she was subjected to on the campus of American University be included in the hearing record.

Taylor’s statement is instructive about the real and consequential impact of hate speech that targets students because of their race, religion, or sexual identity. As Taylor explains,

“When I applied to college, I thought that I would meet new people and learn new things not be the victim of a racially motivated hate crime and cyber-bullying that would interrupt my academics and disrupt my mental, emotional, and physical health.”

Public Safety “trumps” everything.

For students like Taylor, the issue of free speech on college campuses isn’t a right or left issue. Rather, it is criminal acts being wrapped in the false patriotic banner of “free speech.” It is knowing that the symbols and language from 400 years of terror are enough to strike fear in the hearts of every student of color.

As we examine the issue of free speech today on college campuses, let’s keep the focus on addressing some of the real danger, any act of violence, attempt to threaten, intimidate, bully, harass, or violate any other laws that this Nation holds dear. For even with the guiding principles of the United States Constitution, we are a nation of laws and public safety always has been and still is my number one concern.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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