

The cultural diversity case for free speech

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American campus speech codes and informal speech norms discriminate against foreign students and faculty, and that's an important but neglected reason why they should be challenged. Speech codes often claim to protect 'cultural diversity' on campuses, but they often do the reverse. They impose narrow American norms of political correctness on foreign grad students, post-docs, and faculty who can't realistically understand what Americans will find offensive.

From neurodiversity to cultural diversity

In an [article](#) for Quillette last year, I argued that campus speech codes discriminate against 'neurodivergent' people who have Asperger's syndrome, bipolar disorder, PTSD, ADHD, or other conditions. These disorders make it hard to understand and follow speech codes that prohibit saying or doing anything that others might find offensive. In a follow-up [article](#), I outlined how neurodivergent people could use the Americans with Disabilities Act to challenge such discriminatory speech codes.

These neurodivergent conditions are all heritable, and they make people's brains different from the 'neurotypical' average brain, so they could be called 'genetic neurodiversity'. But beyond genetic neurodiversity, there's 'cultural neurodiversity': different people grew up in different countries and cultures, so they have brains that implement different morals, values, and norms, different political and religious attitudes, and different styles of communication and courtship. Cultural neurodiversity, like neurodiversity, raises challenging problems for speech codes.

I'm not talking here about 'cultural diversity' within the U.S. Students born and raised in America may come from different ethnicities, religions, social classes, and regional subcultures, with distinct value systems and communication norms. But they have all been exposed to a national media/educational culture centered around [Left-leaning journalism](#), diversity-obsessed [Hollywood](#), and politicized public school classes controlled by [Democrat-heavy](#) teachers unions.

The American educational/media system indoctrinates students into a normative set of ideological values (for diversity, inclusion, multiculturalism, identity politics, environmentalism, Blank Slate psychology, and Leftist liberalism) and taboos (against any hint of racism, sexism, sexual conservatism, traditional family values, or gratitude for Western Civilization). This shared culture provides common ground when students, staff, and faculty try to anticipate other people's reactions to anything we say or do, as required by most formal speech codes and informal speech norms on American campuses.

Rather, I'm concerned about a deeper form of cultural diversity: the foreigners who come to America to study and teach. A [high proportion](#) of grad students, post-docs, and junior faculty in the U.S. now come from other countries, and they often have very different concepts of what is politically correct versus 'offensive'. In 2004, 55% of engineering Ph.D. students were foreign. In [2009](#), foreign students earned 27% of master's degrees and 33% in doctorate degrees in science and math in the U.S. In 2011, [28%](#) of grad students in science, engineering, and health

were foreign. Overall, [about 5%](#) of undergrads and grad students in 2015 were from foreign countries, but that's up from 3% in 2010, and increasing rapidly. Their most common [countries of origin](#) are China, India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia.

These foreigners are often attracted to America because we market our country as the bastion of free speech, political liberty, and open sexuality. They expect a promised land of free inquiry very different from the repressive government regimes that they may have left behind. [Many countries](#) criminalize various forms of 'hate speech', 'blasphemy', and wrongthink – not just 'repressive' or 'corrupt' countries like [China](#), [India](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), [Russia](#), and [Nigeria](#), but also 'modern liberal democracies' such as [Germany](#), [Australia](#), and [Ireland](#). Students and faculty from countries with such speech restrictions might expect that American universities would honor our much-publicized First Amendment. Yet when they come here, they often discover that formal campus speech codes and informal speech norms prove a dizzying mine field, full of intellectual trip wires and hair-trigger taboo-sensors, atop an ever-shifting ideological landscape. At least in China or Saudi Arabia, there were clear and stable expectations about what they couldn't say. On American campuses, there is no such consistency across issues or across time.

The challenge of switching cultures

I first learned how hard it is to switch cultures when I moved from Stanford to Britain in 1992, for a post-doc at University of Sussex. I was born and raised in Ohio, and had gone to college and grad school in New York and California. I'd never lived abroad, but I thought I understood British culture from watching Jane Austen movies and Masterpiece Theater on PBS. I was wrong. The modern British were much more open than Americans about sex, drugs, and drinking, and didn't have the American obsession with racial politics. But they had plenty of taboos about discussing class, money, the welfare state, and Muslim immigration that took a while to discover. I ended up living in Britain for 9 years, but kept discovering new quirks and sensitivities that were unwritten, unspoken, and unquestioned. When I worked at a Max Planck Institute in Munich in 1995, I had to learn a whole new set of German ideological taboos, centered around fascism and eugenics, construed in the broadest possible terms. Likewise, when I took a sabbatical in Brisbane in 2008, I had to learn the Australian sensitivities around the status of Aboriginal peoples, the history of British colonialism, and East Asian immigration.

For me, every new culture brought new embarrassments, fraught conversations, awkward silences, and social costs. The natives could never clearly articulate what views were permissible versus offensive. Indeed, in most cultures, asking what is taboo is itself taboo, and answering truthfully is even more so. One was simply expected to know, despite being a stranger in a strange land.

I also witnessed the challenge of switching cultures when my department hired two junior faculty from Europe a few years ago. They lived in my house's guest quarters for a few years as they settled in. We often discussed the puzzling aspects of American political culture, such as the connotations of 'undocumented' versus 'illegal', 'transgender' versus 'transsexual', 'black' versus 'African-American', and 'SJW' versus 'progressive activist'. It was especially tricky for them to discern what specific views they were allowed to express when teaching, versus leading small lab group meetings, versus chatting at faculty parties, versus on social media. I'd been working in controversial areas for decades, and had become involved in the academic free speech movement, so I could offer some guidance on what was PC versus non-PC in modern

America. But they kept stumbling upon aspects of PC that I'd never consciously registered, so couldn't warn them about.

To help my colleagues, I tried to list the implicit ideological norms that faculty hires from abroad would be expected to internalize, but that Americans couldn't even acknowledge were norms. The list grew so long that I realized the situation was hopeless. Many of our ideological taboos are so taboo that we can't even list them publicly – much less explain them in new faculty orientations. Yet our universities continue hiring foreign faculty and accepting grad students – without ever giving them clear guidance on how to switch ideological cultures, and what they're actually allowed to believe, say, and do on American campuses.

The culture gap

Consider a foreign grad student who joins an American university after growing up in China, India, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, or Brazil. They were raised in a place with very different social, sexual, political, religious, and cultural norms. Their parents, teachers, and journalists may have routinely used speech that Americans would consider 'sexist', 'racist', or 'homophobic'. Their styles of verbal courtship and sexual interaction might not match the American '[affirmative consent](#)' model of how men and women should interact. (I'm emphasizing mating norms throughout this article because many campus speech codes are smuggled into '[sexual misconduct policies](#)', rather than labeled as 'respectful campus policies'.)

Also, these foreign students may have been exposed to a sample of American pop culture that doesn't represent current campus culture. They may have grown up loving the dialogue in Quentin Tarantino movies, and assume it represents an acceptable conversation style in American seminars. They may have watched a fair amount of American porn as teenagers (Pornhub's top 20 traffic countries in [2016](#) included India, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, the Philippines, and Argentina), and they might assume that porn reflects, at least in a dark mirror, American mating norms. If English was their second language, they have no realistic hope of understanding the ever-changing nuances of American PC-speak, such as the differences between 'colored people' and 'people of color', 'Oriental' and 'Asian', or 'homosexual' and 'queer'. And if, God forbid, they try to level up their coolness by using [Urban Dictionary](#) to master American [Gen-Z](#) dialect, they'll be in for a world of hurt from campus administrators.

Foreign grad students face a formidable culture gap when they set foot on an American campus. They usually want to fit in, be cool, be funny, and attract friends and mates – which often requires pushing boundaries. Humor requires mild transgressions of social norms, for example. Asian grad students may want to challenge the American [stereotype](#) that they're all nerdy, humorless, introverted workaholics, which might require being a bit provocative. But they also don't want to get expelled or disappoint their parents. In calibrating their speech and behavior to our current campus norms, they face complicated risk/benefit tradeoffs, under a high degree of uncertainty about what our norms actually are, and how those norms differ from Tarantino movies, Pornhub scenes, and *South Park* episodes.

Yet, at their new university in the U.S., these foreign students face speech codes full of vague euphemisms, but that lack concrete examples of what words, ideas, facts, and views one is actually forbidden to express. There is not even a list of the most common prohibited words such as the 'racial epithets' that pepper every episode of *South Park*, much less a list of prohibited ideologies. No university offers an annotated version of Urban Dictionary explaining which words and phrases are OK to use in classrooms, which are OK to use at parties but not in

classrooms, which are OK for some groups to use but not for other groups to use, and which are forbidden to everyone all the time.

Yet these foreign students may be required from day one to serve as teaching assistants for an undergrad course on human biology or human sexuality, and to hold office hours for famously sensitive American undergrads. They may be expected to maximize their 'class participation' grades in graduate seminars that discuss politics, religion, sexual orientation, and race relations, without having any idea what they're allowed to say. Far from friends and family, they may crave to develop a social network and find a boyfriend or girlfriend, but they may have no idea how to navigate the hair-trigger sensitivities of campus sexual misconduct policies and Gen-Z dating norms.

In principle, obeying most campus speech codes simply requires being 'respectful', 'inoffensive', and 'considerate'. In principle, following an American speech code is as easy as walking along the yellow brick road of respectfulness through a dark forest of offensiveness. But 'being inoffensive' camouflages the expectation that students will have already mastered a vast amount of implicit knowledge about American ideological norms before they ever set foot on campus. In practice, obeying campus speech codes requires a deep familiarity with American ideological norms, to understand what happens to be considered 'offensive' to U.S. administrators, students, and faculty circa 2018. For foreigners, that's as hard as a [burglar doing acrobatics](#) to get through a field of randomly-moving security lasers that protect that coveted prize: a Ph.D., or tenure. Speech codes are setting up foreign students and researchers for failure. For all the lip service given to 'diversity', the speech codes and norms are baffling to the foreigners who embody real cultural diversity – such as the Chinese students who think that Xi Jinping's authority is superior to American democracy, the Indian students who think arranged marriages are OK, or the Saudi Arabian students who take literally what the Quran says about women.

For example, consider media exposure. Foreign students get a very sparse and misleading impression of current American college life from the movies and TV they may have seen when growing up abroad. The Hollywood movies that have been [most popular abroad](#) have very little content concerning our political and sexual sensitivities – they're almost all big-budget, effects-driven films in the action, science fiction, and animated genres. Among highest-grossing American movies in [overseas revenue](#), a large proportion recently have been Marvel or DC superhero movies, which avoid any explicit ideological issues concerning race relations, sexual misconduct, or political partisanship. The most popular American TV series [abroad](#) tend to be crime dramas, political action thrillers, or fantasy (think *CSI*, *The Blacklist*, or *Game of Thrones*). Other shows popular with foreign young people are cartoons such as *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy*. For the generation entering university today, the most popular movies and TV abroad include virtually no serious dramas set in American colleges.

When students come from China or Saudi Arabia to an American campus, they have to adapt to speech codes and norms that bear little resemblance to those shown in classic college comedy-dramas that they may have seen as teens, such as *Animal House* (1978), *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), *Good Will Hunting* (1998), *Legally Blonde* (2001), or *The Social Network* (2010). Most of these movies dramatize a conflict between playful, irreverent, often offensive students and stuffy, repressed, traditional faculty and administrators. In those movies, the irreverent students always win, partly by pushing the boundaries of free speech and partly by humiliating the sanctimonious censors. Yet in the current American climate, it's mostly the social justice activist students [imposing repressive speech codes](#) and norms on politically centrist, conservative, libertarian, or foreign students and faculty. Only if foreign students happen to have watched

videos by [Jordan Peterson](#), [Christina Hoff Sommers](#), [Jonathan Haidt](#), [Alice Dreger](#), other viewpoint diversity advocates are they likely to understand the current situation.

Moreover, consider the overlap of cultural diversity and neurodiversity: if many foreign students come to study and work in STEM fields, they're [more likely](#) to be on the autism spectrum, stronger on [systematizing](#) ideas than empathizing with the ideological sensitivities of others. So, many of them face a triple handicap: they may have aspie brains, developed in foreign cultures with different speech norms, using English as their second language to express possibly taboo ideas. But their concerns are neglected, because they don't tend to get organized, complain, and protest in the way that many U.S. undergrads do. They don't have the same '[coddling culture](#)'. In fact, they may have come from more authoritarian cultures where students show extreme [respect for academics](#). They may not know how to petition administrators to protect their rights and to change policies, and may not even realize this is possible. (Chinese nationals might assume that students protests risk ending in a Tiananmen Square crackdown.) When American students are loudly protesting in libraries, foreign students may be the ones just [trying to study](#). They may also worry about their immigration status if they make trouble: students or postdocs might worry about losing their F-1 visas, and faculty may worry about losing their J-1 and H-1B visa. Finally, they may feel a risk-averse accountability to their parents and extended family, who may have invested heavily in their education, and who would lose face if they got into any trouble.

The challenge of foreign student groups

How do foreign students react when they come to American campuses and encounter these baffling new forms of political correctness? Many do their best to acculturate and learn the unwritten norms. But many feel alienated by American culture. They often withdraw into student groups centered around their home culture, where they feel more at ease. In grad school, I often went to Bollywood movie nights sponsored by the Stanford India Association, which was full of grad students from India. In class, these students often seemed wary, cautious, intimidated, and uneasy. But on these evenings, among young people from their own culture, they were joyous, uninhibited, confident, and funny. They could relax, because they knew the cultural rules.

Most universities have student groups for different countries. My university has fewer foreign students than most, but its [list](#) of student clubs still includes a Brazil Club, Chinese Language and Culture Club, Deutsch Klub, Filipino Student Organization, Iranian Student Association, Korean Club, Mexican Student Association, Taiwanese Student Association, and Turkish Student Association. Such student groups offer an oasis of cultural familiarity in the desert of ideological unfamiliarity.

These student groups raise a problem, though: do our campus speech codes and norms apply to them? If a bunch of Brazilian students throw a party, which codes and norms apply? Can they talk about political, moral, religious, and sexual issues the way that they would at home, or do they have to follow our [Respectful Campus Policy](#) in the ways that they would if interacting with Americans, given all of our strange hang-ups and taboos? If they're flirting, canoodling, and falling in love the way they would in São Paulo or Fortaleza, can they use the verbal courtship norms they've soaked up since adolescence, or do they have to follow our norms of 'non-sexist' speech and 'affirmative consent'?

These foreign student groups occupy a grey area between the home country and American culture, and create a huge problem for campus speech codes. No American campus speech

code I've ever read has been clear about how it applies to foreign student groups, their meetings, their parties, and their relationships. How much elbow room do they really get to be themselves when they're among their compatriots?

I think we must support freedom of association for foreign students to form groups based on their national cultures. But with freedom of association should come freedom of speech and freedom of conscience. Foreign grad students should be able to enjoy a respite from American political correctness where they can relax back into their home culture without fear of their speech and behavior being policed by self-righteous American administrators and social justice activists. This means, in practice, that American campus speech codes, based on American notions of what is acceptable versus offensive, cannot be imposed on foreign student groups.

Here's the tricky part: if we don't impose these speech codes on foreign students doing their own thing, why should we impose them on American students doing their own thing? If the Mormon students in the Stanford Latter-Day Saint Student Association ([LDSSA](#)) want to have a party where they court one another according to the norms of their home culture in Utah, do they have less right to do so than the Brazilian students? If the young kink enthusiasts of the [Harvard College Munch](#) student club want to have a party where the BDSM norms of [pre-negotiation](#) and [safewords](#) apply, rather than the usual campus policies of affirmative consent, shouldn't they be able to enact the well-honed rules of their sub-culture rather than conforming to a [vanilla](#) administrator's idea of 'sexual respect'?

Examples like this highlight a key problem with speech codes and norms: their one-size-fits-all inflexibility. It's not just that every foreign student's home culture is its own culture. It's that, despite the hegemony of mainstream media, every American sub-culture becomes into its own culture. Every academic department becomes its own culture. Indeed, every university seminar becomes its own culture over the course of each semester. Real cultural diversity – including free speech, viewpoint diversity, and sexual heterogeneity – can't flourish if every sub-culture on an American campus is subject to the same administrative norms of inoffensiveness.

Why should we care that speech codes discriminate against foreign students and faculty?

First, there's the financial issue. American universities get a lot of revenue from foreign students: total financial contributions were about [\\$30 billion](#) in 2015. The foreign students often pay full tuition for degrees, with little financial aid. If we make them miserable while they're here by imposing confusing speech codes and terrifying sexual misconduct policies, word will get out. They will take their rupees, euros, renminbi, and pesos elsewhere, and we will lose not only their tuition payments in the short term, but their alumni donations in the long term. Also, many American universities get a lot of grant money from successful foreign faculty. If we make American campuses ideologically hostile work environments for the best, brightest, most fundable scholars from abroad, we handicap our universities' intellectual cultures and research funding.

Second, there's a national PR issue: America is supposed to be the land of freedom. It's important for America's global influence that foreign students feel happy and free when they come to our campuses. American universities have a huge influence in training the global elites: the brightest foreign undergrads from the most influential families are likely to become business and political leaders back in their home countries. The brightest foreign grad students will become scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs, shaping the intellectual cultures of the coming

global mega-powers: China and India. This is the main rationale for the U.S. Department of State running the [Fulbright programs](#) – to promote international good will through the cultural exchange of students and scholars. The experiences that foreign grad students have on American campuses will shape their views of our country forever. If they come expecting a culture of freedom and openness, but they encounter a culture of repression, sanctimony, and over-sensitivity, their view of the U.S. will sour. If they come hoping to escape traditionalist cultures of misogyny, arranged marriages, and slut-shaming, but they encounter even weirder forms of sex-negativity such as ‘affirmative consent culture’ that deters them from dating and drives them into asexual worker-bee mode, they’ll be frustrated and bitter. If they escaped one form of political conformism, repression, and coercion only to encounter an even more hypocritical form of it, they may see American freedom, democracy, and diversity as fake news.

Finally, there’s the ethical issue. Foreign students and faculty are people too. Their happiness, security, and freedom matters just as much as that of American students. This is simple application of the [impartiality principle](#) from utilitarian moral philosophy. Just because foreign students don’t make as much of a fuss as American social activist students doesn’t mean their lives matter less. They may be suffering in silence, because they were raised not to complain. If American universities are willing to accept foreign students and faculty at all, we have a duty to treat them fairly, with the same moral regard accorded to their peers. This includes respecting their basic human rights to freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and freedom of courtship. That’s the path towards real cultural diversity on American campuses.

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