

“Campus Leaders Must Show Courage”

This article is from the “Edifying the Body” section of the Church of God Big Sandy’s website (churchofgodbigandy.com). It was posted for the weekend of April 27, 2024. (A version of the article was posted at nypost.com on April 24.)

By Robert Kraft

BROOKLINE, Mass.—When I enrolled in Columbia, it was on a full academic scholarship.

It helped make me who I am today—it allowed me to grow, learn and be successful as I set out into the world.

Without the opportunity I was given, I would not have been able to attend college and learn from professors who encouraged students to cultivate independent thought and the ability to engage critically with diverse viewpoints.

Today, the attention and visuals surrounding the hateful protests taking place on Columbia’s campus have been focused on the students, but the students have been taught and empowered by faculty more focused on politics than they are on education.

These are not the professors I had who exemplified the fundamental principles underpinning the mission of higher education in the United States.

Those principles were what set our academic institutions apart from the rest of the world and gave America a distinct competitive advantage.

This is no longer the case.

I do not recognize my alma mater.

Signs at Columbia University read “Go Back to Poland,” calling for the Jewish community to return to the horrific death camps of the Holocaust.

They chant “Kill all the Jews” and “October 7th 10,000 more times.”

This hateful rhetoric calling for the death and destruction of an entire population has no place at Columbia and no place anywhere.

Period.

Students now celebrate and promulgate hatred and divisiveness against a whole people.

And, worse, their professors are not only encouraging them, but joining them and partaking in the actions.

The Columbia I loved is no longer a place I know.

Those defining principles, once so revered, have been sacrificed by professors keen to use the classroom and the campus as a bully pulpit to promote their personal political viewpoints as opposed to fostering critical thinking—they preach eliminationist rhetoric championed by unchecked and dangerous activist groups.

Jewish students have had to endure a level of fear and intimidation that I am not sure any other group in modern times this century has had to face on a college campus spread by people that are meant to protect them, not hate them.

Responsible free speech

Addressing this virulent hatred of Jews is not a political issue, but rather a human issue.

And, if academic institutions of higher education in the United States of America no longer address human issues, then I am afraid they have lost their moral compasses.

Addressing this does not require an encroachment upon the free speech of students or faculty.

This is a false narrative.

I am a firm believer in freedom of speech.

But “free speech” is not calling for physical violence with your face hidden behind masks and coverings—that’s cowardice.

Free speech is taking responsibility for your words, and for putting your name and your face behind your thoughts.

Leaders of educational institutions need to begin enforcing their codes of conduct with members of their community—students and faculty alike.

If presidents do not, their boards need to hold them accountable.

Otherwise, what are they teaching our students?

They are promoting the notion and setting the example that there is no accountability—if there was, these protests would stop.

Students have seen that rules do not apply, so they choose not to follow them.

While difficult, our larger universities need to set an example and start stripping tenure away regardless of the legal fights they may face.

Anarchist members of the faculty must know that they will be held accountable for their actions.

We have seen numerous examples of faculty members violating university codes of conduct in an attempt to poison young minds and sow divisions among an already polarized society.

This cannot continue.

In an era marked by a growing divisiveness across the country, colleges and universities should not be breeding grounds for hate and polarization.

Rather, colleges and universities—places that allow for exposure to diverse cultures, experiences and viewpoints—have a unique opportunity to promote and cultivate understanding and respect for one another.

Rampant Jewish hate

Over the last several years, starting with the Charlottesville march in 2017, I started to feel a dangerous shift in the country as more and more instances of hate began to rise.

Now we have rampant Jewish hate on college campuses that has been permitted to go largely unchecked.

I started the Foundation to Combat Antisemitism (FCAS) in 2019 for precisely these reasons—to educate young people and appeal to the empathy that I believe all humans are born with.

I felt that it was imperative that we do something to ensure that our country did not start to look like the Germany of the 1940s.

Never could I have imagined in America, in 2024, that Jewish students would be told by campus administrators to flee their college campus for their own safety.

This is heartbreaking under any circumstance and devastating to know it happened at my alma mater, a school I loved that has given me so much.

My worst fears—what I have spent the last five years fighting against, using FCAS's blue square, a symbol of standing up to all hate—are being realized and we all need to take action to make it stop.

Unchecked faculties have allowed this hate to grow and fester by using their classrooms for espousing personal views instead of educating.

Their job should not be that of journalists and politicians.

Their job is not to teach students what to think; their job is to teach students how to think.

To that end, the job of administrators is to manage the faculty, not to stand idly by as their campuses are taken over by a minority of students or to compromise with or negotiate with those violating the rules.

The students at our colleges and universities deserve stronger leadership.

Courage to do the right thing, a core attribute of effective leadership, is lacking at the highest level at our nation's most elite academic institutions.

It is my hope that the governing boards of these institutions prioritize courage to lead and do the right thing when selecting their presidents.