

In the year 1980, my mom was a senior in high school, like I am today. Like me, she aspired to attend college and study what she was passionate about. However, when my uncle tried leaving the country, she was not allowed to go to college due to my family's political beliefs. Throughout her years in the Cuban education system, she had been taught to glorify a government, which led by Castro, imprisoned, tortured, and executed those who disagreed with this system. For this reason, they feared that someone like her, who was aware of the reality of the country, would receive an education. Authoritarian governments fear free thinkers, as they can create change and lead others towards liberty. Hence, freedom in educational institutions is a virtue which one should value, as it allows us to create the future that we want—rather than one that is imposed on us.

My parents brought me to this country at a young age for one thing—*freedom*. They brought me so that, unlike my mother, I would attend college regardless of my family's political opinion. So that, unlike my great uncle, I would not be incarcerated and tortured for not supporting the government. So that unlike my uncle, I would not be threatened if I ever tried to leave the country. So that unlike every Cuban, I would not be indoctrinated and censored throughout my education. Today, free speech is in danger in universities throughout the United States—posing democracy at risk.

My awareness of the importance of freedom has been harbored by cognizance of what it is like to live without it. When students are not allowed to speak freely, it takes away from their ability to learn, understand others, and create a better future. When institutions censor students, it creates an ambiance of fear. How can this occur in the “land of the free, and the home of the brave,” the country which has been seen as a beacon of liberty? The first amendment to the Constitution grants freedom of expression to the people of the United States; if this is limited in colleges, not only is the Constitution being violated, but a generation of Americans are being taught to diminish the value of their freedom and to conform to limitations imposed by those with power. This places our country's democracy in danger, as college education has a large influence on young people—the future leaders and professionals of the United States.

Censorship creates a uniformity with which this country was not founded. Historically, the two-party system in the United States has maintained democracy and prevented one-sidedness. However, if students are taught that they must all think the same and are not allowed to hear opposing opinions, this balance will be tipped—taking away the essence of the United States.

The concept of freedom is one that has been explored by people of different backgrounds and political spectrums. For example, the Cuban thinker José Martí, described liberty as “the right of every man to be honest, to think and speak without hypocrisy.” Similarly, founding father Benjamin Franklin described freedom as a right, one which “is not a gift bestowed upon us by other men, but a right that belongs to us by the Gods and nature.” Freedom has been seen by philosophers as a right to think and express ourselves, one which we receive at birth and should not be taken by men. This concept of natural rights roots from enlightenment thinker John Locke, who stated that we are all born with natural rights—life, liberty, and property—those of which cannot be taken away by the government. The United States was founded with these

principles, as they are a primary aspect of the Constitution. Why should an educational institution, which allows students to form their future, be given the power to take away the ideals which formed this country?

Taking away freedom at lower levels, such as schools, can serve as a catalyst to the elimination of liberty on a larger scale. This would follow the patterns of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Revolutionary Cuba, and many other dictatorships which have not allowed the youth to truly learn and be exposed to ideas different than the ones that have been imposed upon them. One should be able to express any belief without any sort of fear, as this is the reason that many have left their home countries or rebelled against their government. Lack of freedom, historically, has led to rebellion—one can see this with monarchies and authoritarian governments. Therefore, taking away freedom in colleges can lead to manifestations of rebellion, or can opposingly lead to fear—both of which can be avoided by respecting students' Constitutional rights.

Overall, students' rights should be respected in colleges, the same way that they should be respected by any government or ruler. Freedom leads to creation, collaboration, and understanding, while censorship leads to insurrection, misunderstanding, and closed-mindedness. As a Cuban American, I have learned that freedom prevails in darkness. I have been witness to how free thinking has brought my parents towards a better future, and how lack of freedom in a country leads to uneducated and uninformed citizens. Hence, students like me should use their freedom of speech to limit censorship, as freedom is a vehicle for progress and knowledge.