



Faculty Senate

Message from Faculty Senate President, Beauvais Lyons

Dear Colleagues:

This week, someone painted the Rock at the University of Tennessee with the messages, “It’s OK to be White” and “White Pride.” Both slogans are associated with the “Alt-Right” and white supremacist groups. The Tennessee legislature enacted the [Campus Free Speech Act](#) to help ensure that campus speech is safeguarded, even when it is “wrong-headed.”

While these messages are protected speech, they are entirely wrong-headed, and are harmful to members of our community. Speech that threatens people into not speaking back – answering speech with speech – is pernicious in this aspect, and must be rejected as antithetical to our community’s values. That the messages on the Rock were written anonymously also makes them threatening to our community’s sense of wellbeing. I am deeply concerned for members of our campus community for whom these messages are not only unwelcome but hostile. No one should fear for their personal safety on our campus.

A university needs to be a place that protects free speech rights, not only to safeguard academic freedom, but also to be consistent with applicable laws. Nevertheless, anonymous speech raises some unique and critical issues. There are certainly circumstances when it can protect whistle blowers and thus have value to society. In the case of "trolling the Rock," we have to ask ourselves if this is one of

the perils of these protections in a free society. It is worth considering that most messages on the Rock are signed, or the origin of their message clearly understood.

In October 2016, the Faculty Senate held a forum on [Free Speech and Diversity](#). Panelists included students, faculty and community members from a variety of political and religious perspectives. While this forum was held prior to passing the Campus Free Speech Act, the core issues raised are ones that we continue to face as a community. As a university, it is clear that we have more work to do to create a campus culture that encourages free and responsible speech.

Over the coming weeks there will be many opportunities to give public expression to our commitment to building an inclusive campus community. To stand with others against racism, you may want to attend the [2018 Race Against Racism and Diversity Day](#) on January 4. Advancing justice is a long-distance run, and we look forward to working with Chancellor Davenport and the campus administration in our efforts to make our university more inclusive and welcoming for all.

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