

**Written Testimony of Zachary R. Wood**  
President of Uncomfortable Learning

**Before the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary**

**“Free Speech 101: The Assault on the First Amendment on  
College Campuses.”**

June 20, 2017

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Madam Ranking Member, and Distinguished Members of the committee. I am honored and privileged to have the opportunity to appear before you.

My name is Zach Wood. I am a senior and the President of Uncomfortable Learning at Williams College.<sup>1</sup> Over the last two years, I have advocated for the importance of engaging controversial and offensive views on college campuses.<sup>2</sup> I am here to testify about the state of free speech and intellectual freedom in higher education.

When I arrived at Williams College to begin my freshman year, I had high hopes that my intellectual experience would stimulate vigorous debate and encourage robust and open discussion of controversial issues. I identify as a liberal democrat who supports many progressive causes. Yet I adamantly believe that students should be encouraged to engage with people and ideas they vehemently disagree with. As president of Uncomfortable Learning at Williams, I strive to broaden the range of political discourse on campus by inviting speakers with challenging, provocative, out-of-the-mainstream views on pressing issues of our time.<sup>3</sup>

I joined Uncomfortable Learning my freshman year because I wanted to push my intellectual limits. I wanted to confront controversy, to clarify the issues that challenge people the most and why. I wanted to discuss the content of competing arguments and how best to respond to unwelcome ideas and offensive speech. Humanity is not limited to the views and values we admire. Humanity also encompasses the thought and action we resist. To gain a deeper understanding of humanity, I have made a concerted effort to understand as thoroughly as possible the visions and convictions of those whose arguments I diametrically oppose.

In so doing, I have faced considerable backlash in addition to administrative obstacles.<sup>4</sup> For inviting controversial speakers to campus, I've been labeled "a men's rights activist," "a sellout," and "anti-Black," among other things. I've also been the target of implicit threats. On Facebook, one student wrote that "they need the oil and the switch to deal with him [me] in this midnight hour." Once, I even received a hand-written letter, slipped under my door, that read: "your blood will be on the leaves."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.chronicle.com/items/biz/resource/ChronFocus\\_ControversialSpeakersv3\\_i.pdf](http://www.chronicle.com/items/biz/resource/ChronFocus_ControversialSpeakersv3_i.pdf) (pg. 22)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thefire.org/williams-colleges-zachary-r-wood-racism-is-a-pathetic-excuse-for-disinviting-a-speaker-from-campus/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbM0RKeZYlQ>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-uncomfortable-truth/article/2005012>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/04/14/i-tried-to-confront-racism-head-on-people-called-me-a-sellout/?utm\\_term=.20b8bd7cbc07](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/04/14/i-tried-to-confront-racism-head-on-people-called-me-a-sellout/?utm_term=.20b8bd7cbc07)

This acrimonious response from the student body was jarring. Yet I resolved to ignore the ad hominem attacks and continue pressing forward.<sup>6</sup> During my sophomore year, I invited pop math author and conservative commentator John Derbyshire to speak at Williams about race and national identity. My announcement of Derbyshire's invitation angered many students and faculty on campus precisely because Derbyshire had previously made incendiary comments about African-Americans. Within 48 hours of the event, Adam Falk, the president of Williams College unilaterally canceled the speaker.<sup>7</sup> Days later, President Falk enacted new speaker policies that made bringing speakers to campus an especially arduous process for my student group.<sup>8</sup>

On paper, these policies appear neutral and are stated to apply to all on campus. However, mere mention of application leaves disparate impact and enforcement unspecified. In reality, certain provisions of the new speaker policies considerably hinder the ability of my student group to bring controversial speakers to campus. To be clear, these new rules in and of themselves are within the rights of a private college. Although circumstantial evidence clearly reveals the administration's intent to limit my ability to bring controversial speakers to campus, that motivation, for reasons that seem obvious to many, has never been explicitly stated.

What I find impermissible, undemocratic, and antithetical to the intellectual character of the college I attend is the President's decision to disinvite a speaker solely on the basis of his inflammatory comments about race. At Williams, the administration promotes social tolerance at the expense of political tolerance. In my time at Williams, I cannot name a single conservative speaker that has been brought to campus by the administration. This fact is problematic precisely because the overwhelming majority of students and faculty on campus espouse liberal beliefs, thereby contributing to what several commentators have referred to as an "echo chamber." In classrooms, liberal arguments are often treated as unquestionable truths. In some cases, conservative students even feel the need to refrain from stating their opinion in fear of being shutdown, or strongly disliked for doing so. I appreciate the desire of my administration to make Williams a college in which all students feel included. Yet I deplore the state of free speech and intellectual freedom on my campus.

In our present moment, Williams is just one of many colleges that has disinvited controversial speakers. At colleges and universities across the country students face speech codes, free speech zones, and other infringements upon their first amendment rights. Instead of nurturing thoughtful debate of controversial topics, many college educators and administrators discourage free debate by shielding students from offensive ideas. Yet, one person's offensive idea is another person's viewpoint.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/12/03/students-need-physical-space-campus-debate-controversial-issues-essay>

<sup>7</sup> <https://president.williams.edu/letters-from-the-president/john-derbyshires-scheduled-appearance-at-williams/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://student-life.williams.edu/events/>

To some, ardent defense of free speech is characterized as a conservative attack on liberal progressivism. It is said that the real issues that need to be addressed on college campuses are not free speech and intellectual freedom. Rather, the most critical issues are racism, sexism, and micro-aggressions. The fundamental problem with this characterization is that all of these issues intersect and none of them can be resolved without an appreciation of free speech and intellectual freedom in higher education.

For me, free speech is not about grinding a partisan axe or advancing any set of enduring ideological preferences. I care deeply about my education and I value the freedom to interrogate all manner of contentious ideas and beliefs in hope of gaining a deeper understanding of the world and using that knowledge to one day make a positive difference in the lives of others. Free speech and intellectual freedom matter to me because they are among the founding principles that animate the vibrance and ensure the sustenance of our democracy.

Zachary R. Wood is a Robert L. Bartley Fellow at The Wall Street Journal and a Class of 2018 Herbert H. Lehman Scholar at Williams College, where he serves as President of Uncomfortable Learning, a student group that sparked national controversy for inviting provocative speakers to campus. A Washington DC native, Wood currently resides in New York City. His recent work has appeared in The Washington Post, The Nation, Times Higher Education, The Weekly Standard, and SLAM Magazine.