Because Williams College is committed to free and open inquiry in all matters, it guarantees all members of the college community the broadest possible latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge, and learn. Except insofar as limitations on that freedom are necessary to the functioning of the college, Williams College fully respects and supports the freedom of all members of the college community “to discuss any problem that presents itself.”

Of course, the ideas of different members of the Williams community will often and quite naturally conflict. But it is not the proper role of the college to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. Although Williams greatly values civility, and although all members of the college community share in the responsibility for maintaining a climate of mutual respect, concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as a justification for closing off discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members of our community.

The freedom to debate and discuss the merits of competing ideas does not, of course, mean that individuals may say whatever they wish, wherever they wish. Williams may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the college. In addition, Williams may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of the college. But these are narrow exceptions to the general principle of freedom of expression, and it is vitally important that these exceptions never be used in a manner that is inconsistent with Williams College’s commitment to a completely free and open discussion of ideas.

In a word, the college’s fundamental commitment is to the principle that debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the college community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed. It is for the individual members of the college community, not for Williams as an institution, to make those judgments for themselves, and to act on those judgments not by seeking to suppress speech, but by openly and vigorously contesting the ideas that they oppose. Indeed, fostering the ability of members of the college community to engage in such debate and deliberation in an effective and responsible manner is an essential part of Williams College’s educational mission.

As a corollary to the college’s commitment to protect and promote free expression, members of the college community must also act in conformity with the principle of free expression. Although members of the college community are free to criticize and contest the views expressed on campus, and to criticize and contest speakers who are invited to express their views on campus, they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe. To this end, Williams has a solemn responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless freedom of debate and deliberation, but also to protect that freedom when others attempt to restrict it.
To the Williams community,

Recently, a petition has circulated throughout the faculty urging the College to adopt a statement released by the University of Chicago in 2015, which claims to defend the right to “free speech and free expression” on college campuses.¹ The authors of the Williams petition assert that “while there is an understandable desire to protect our students from speech they find offensive, doing so risks shutting down legitimate dialogue and failing to prepare our students to deal effectively with a diversity of opinions, including views they might vehemently disagree with.” We, the authors of this letter, take grave issue with the premises of this petition and the potential harm it may inflict upon our community.

We are at once angered by the context in which this petition has emerged and highly critical of its content. This process is not only engaged against Williams College’s Mission and Principles, but also against those of the petition itself. Not allowing students into the discussion and circulation of the petition limits the potential for conflicting viewpoints and is thus completely antithetical to a free speech premise. According to the college’s Mission Statement, “Faculty members invite students to become partners in the process of intellectual discovery.” We see none of this. With increasingly visible violence towards those our society’s most marginalized, why is this discussion happening now? “Free Speech,” as a term, has been co-opted by right-wing and liberal parties as a discursive cover racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and classism. The creation of this petition at Williams cannot be separated from those dehumanizing associations. Nor can it be separated from a national pattern where certain amendments are upheld and protected at all costs and others are completely denigrated, ignored, and targeted. Take the privileging of the 2nd amendment over the 14th amendment, for example. Mirroring this harmful prioritization, Williams’ sudden and urgent need to protect “free speech” over all other issues for students and community members is evidence of white fragility, ideological anxiety, and discursive violence. This petition and the Chicago Statement are purely semantics and posturing. Why can’t we actually have a campus-wide discussion on this issue, one that is not dominated by conservative and white faculty? Can this instead be an opportunity to take a critical eye to how free speech is constructed and weaponized at institutions like Williams?

We would like to draw attention to specific elements of the petition. The use of “controversy” in the piece is oversimplified and reductive. The petition prioritizes the protection of ideas over the protection of people and fails to recognize that behind every idea is a person with a particular subjectivity. Our beliefs, and the consequences of our actions, are choices we make. Any claim to the “protection of ideas” that is not founded in the insurance of people’s safety poses a real threat — one which targets most pointedly marginalized people. An ideology of free speech absolutism that prioritizes ideas over people, giving “deeply offensive” language a platform at this institution, will inevitably imperil marginalized students.

¹“Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression” by U Chicago, January 2015

Liberal ideology asserts that morality is logical—that dehumanizing ideas can be fixed with logic and therefore need to be debated. However, oppression is the result of centuries of real emotional and material interests, and dehumanization cannot be discussed away. In truth, a liberal framework for “rational debate” rests upon a cognitive hierarchy that says intelligence equals morality and discussion equals good actions. The reality is that the academy has a dark history of enacting racism. Topics like eugenics, once debated as “civil rational discussion,” have now been acknowledged as indefensibly racist frameworks. Finally, those who dictate what gets to be debated are generally overrepresented folks from backgrounds of privilege. Therefore, this petition has grave potential to further silence the voices of people of color, queer people, disabled people, poor people, and others outside the center of power.

And while the University of Chicago statement says that students “may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject,” the issue is that these are not views we reject; they are views that reject us, and our very right to speak/breathe. The UChicago Statement, in failing to see this, has rejected our right to counter-protest, to “interfere.” Thus, our rights protected by the 1st amendment are eradicated by a petition that claims to support “free speech.” This document does not promote free speech: it punishes it. In a time when members of Congress on both sides of the aisle are asking for activists to be tried under the Patriot Act, and counter-terrorism legislation has continued to increase world governments’ abilities to violently deny the right to peaceful protest, the College cannot support and thereby strengthen such absolute, reckless, and dangerous policies.

We are also skeptical of the “free speech” debate more broadly. The faculty petition is based on the false premise that the free dissemination of viewpoints means that all speech has an equal chance of being heard. Simply letting all speech be spoken does not, in practice, accomplish the petition’s stated goal of ensuring that different and diverse viewpoints, particularly those of marginalized people, are heard. Ultimately, power determines whose speech is given space and taken seriously. By putting resources and publicity behind certain speakers, we affirm their thoughts and ideas, bolstering their reputation with the weight of our institution’s academic legitimacy. When it comes to the actual choice of who comes to speak or how we otherwise engage in discourse at Williams, we must curate those speakers carefully, because ultimately all speaking engagements on campus are curated. Giving one person space/time to speak on campus means that another person is not given that space/time. We have to become attuned to the absences that accompany people’s presence on campus.

Who does this campus prioritize, and who does this statement truly aim to protect? John Derbyshire is a self-proclaimed “racist” and “homophobe” who was invited to speak at Williams by Uncomfortable Learning in 2016. He wrote an article proclaiming, among many other atrocious, untrue things, that “the mean intelligence of Blacks is much lower than for whites” and “[do] not attend events likely to draw a lot of blacks.” Adam Falk disinvited him to campus.

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1 Letter to Sessions, November 2017
2 Letter to Sessions, November 2017
3 “John Derbyshire fired for article urging children to avoid African Americans” in the Guardian, April 2012
but a free speech absolutism policy, like the one in this petition, would have limited the President and allowed Derbyshire to spew homophobia and anti-Black racism on campus. To quote Aiyana Porter at last week’s Black Student Union town hall, “John Derbyshire literally said that Black people are not humans. I’m not going to consider that in my classroom….Who are we okay with making uncomfortable? Why are we so driven to making those particular people uncomfortable? If we are so insistent on making them uncomfortable, then we at least need some institutional support to get through all of the discomfort that you are thrusting upon us?”

Williams College continually fails to support its most marginalized students, staff, and faculty members, despite claiming to have a deep commitment to “diversity.” Cheryl Shanks’ letter to the editor states that “To sign on to this statement is not to reject safe spaces. The College should allow for, and even provide, safe spaces. In fact, it does.” As noted by dozens of students at the BSU town hall and the phenomenal letter released this week by Professors Love and Green, this is simply untrue: many students with marginalized identities feel as if the College does not provide adequate support for them. Students of color feel tokenized in entries, CSS has a history of racist actions, queer faculty of color are subjected to racism and homophobia/transphobia, minority students lack autonomous space, etc. If we are to engage in this discussion, let us take a critical lens to the ways that “free speech” has been leveraged to silence dissent, not strengthen it.

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4 “BSU Town Hall” by Williams College Black Student Union on Youtube, November 2018.
5 “Why We Cannot wait for Tenure to Insist upon our Dignity, Respect, Power, and Value” in the Feminist Wire, November 2018.