

Counterpoint: Colleges can have both freedom of expression, compassion

That's the balance Macalester College arrived at, with care, regarding an art exhibit.

By Suzanne M. Rivera FEBRUARY 16, 2023 — 5:45PM

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The poet Sarah Kay says, "Sometimes the question is 'or' but the answer is 'and.' "

I've been thinking about this a lot recently while reading numerous essays on whether increasing diversity on college campuses is hindering freedom of inquiry and expression. The writers frequently position inclusion efforts on college campuses as a "challenge" that must be managed or overcome. I disagree, and a recent incident on our campus illustrates why.

At Macalester College, where I serve as president, we recently opened an art exhibit in a gallery with glass walls in an academic building on campus. The exhibit contains material some students found sacrilegious, and includes the depiction of a beheading and a noose hanging from the ceiling.

Upon learning of student concerns, we temporarily paused the exhibit over a weekend to make time for discussion and to ask some questions: Would a content warning be appropriate, much like we see on television at the beginning of a show for mature audiences, or hear before a radio segment describing potentially disturbing details? Does the fact that the gallery has glass walls mean that students passing by are subjected to this material without choosing to see it and, if so, is that a problem worth addressing? What other steps might we take to preserve access while still showing respect to those who expressed concern?

This was an intentional, measured approach to navigate the complexities inherent in fostering a pluralistic community of learners. People unfamiliar with the nuances have labeled our actions as "censorship" and "infringement of academic and artistic freedom." These accusations miss an important point: Freedom does not relieve us of our ethical responsibility to be kind to one another.

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It may seem corny to talk about virtues like kindness but, as an ethicist, that's where I think we need to focus this conversation. Free speech already is protected by the Constitution and academic freedom already is protected by faculty shared governance and tenure. Kindness, on the other hand, is in short supply. Being kind is not about

"caving to a woke mob." It is about caring enough to ask hard questions and reflect about whether we truly have considered other points of view. It's about listening closely to members of our community and seeking to understand when some of them express a concern.

Briefly pausing the exhibit gave our community time to think and talk, and develop solutions that make sense for us. During this pause, curtains were hung over the glass walls outside the gallery to prevent unintended viewing of the exhibit by passersby. Here's what else happened: The curtains were removed after 36 hours and the gallery was reopened Monday morning. The glass doors and some windows now have UV film frosting, which reduces the chances of unintentional viewing. Nothing was removed or rearranged in the exhibit, which remains open to the public. And we extended the show by two days to ensure it gets the full run. These actions were taken before any outside criticism emerged.

To characterize our approach as censorship is cynical and misses two important points. The first is that this was not a case of constitutionally protected freedom of expression. The second is that we preserved the exhibit intact, without alteration, so it could continue to be viewed. As educators, we treated this as an opportunity to listen and learn. We upheld the principle of free inquiry, allowed time for important dialogue, and attended to the concerns of students who chose to make Macalester their intellectual home.

Those students are among 2,100 who come from every U.S. state and 96 countries. They have vastly different lived experiences and beliefs. Deliberately bringing together diverse communities on a college campus like Macalester's requires that we approach the inevitable conflicts that will arise with empathy and by listening to various points of view. This is consistent with our values and it's why students choose to come here.

Pitting freedom of inquiry against attempts to foster a compassionate community in which all members can thrive creates a false conflict. We can care about and do more than one thing at a time.

So, like Sarah Kay, I want to challenge the premise. The question may be framed by others as "freedom *or* care?" but I believe the answer is "freedom *and* care."

Suzanne M. Rivera is president of Macalester College in St. Paul.