



Abigail Karlin
Secondary Education & History

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL DISCOURSE AND FREE SPEECH?

As a student and a future educator, there are few things I have valued more in my education than civil discourse. Often, we learn and grow the most from our disagreements and how we resolve them. However, to truly understand each other, we cannot be limited by restrictions on what we are allowed to say.

Free speech is a human right, and a pillar of our society acknowledged around the world. The United Nations, in their Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” (UN, 1948) Everyone on our planet has the right to have and voice their thoughts and concerns. This right to free speech is always important, even if the subject is controversial or seemingly inconsequential.

I’m grateful that we don’t live in a black and white world with one right answer. Having free speech where people are not only allowed but encouraged to point out flaws in our systems is what leads to progress and change. However, if the goal is to create meaningful change, this free speech cannot exist in a vacuum or an echo chamber. Consider ‘Free Speech Zones’ commonly used on college campuses or in public spaces like libraries. Often, during times of protest, these zones are used to separate people with different beliefs, by placing

protesters in one area and counterprotesters in another. No one learns or benefits from an arrangement where we only hear those who already agree with us.

Civil discourse, by definition, is a limit on free speech. It requires that two opposing parties discuss their disagreement civilly, with a goal of reaching an understanding of different views, leading to compromise. This limits not only the ways that the speakers can interact with each other, but in the way they must rephrase their ideas or arguments to be more easily understood. Civil discourse, especially in educational environments, is how we learn to dialogue with those who disagree with us. In our current political climate, where every issue is divisive, and some seek to use those divisions to drive people further apart, it is important to approach disagreements with a goal of understanding. However, civil discourse that limits free speech so entirely that people feel uncomfortable expressing their true feelings or beliefs is not the goal either. Real debate, with the goal of real progress requires both honesty and listening.

Through debate, formal and informal, I have revised my opinions over and over again, and have learned an immeasurable amount from other’s perspectives. Free speech allows us to think, feel, or say whatever we want, but it is through civil discourse that we learn from others with that same right.