





A student walks across a snowy Bascom Hill on January 22, 2025. Photo by [Jake Piper](#) | The Daily Cardinal

OPINION

Cardinal View: Conservatives say they're silenced at UW-Madison. What they really want is immunity from criticism

Free speech at UW isn't under attack, it's being weaponized.

By [The Daily Cardinal Editorial Board](#)

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For decades, conservatives on and off college campuses around the country have ridiculed "ideological diversity." They sneer at "liberal snowflakes," complain about self-censorship and allege a lack of conservative representation to support their federal research cuts.

The situation at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is no different. Conservative lawmakers and campus activists paint the university as a campus suffocated by "liberal bias" with a free-speech crisis. Conservative groups mimicked campus protesters, threatened cuts to the university system's finances and disparaged the lack of conservative professors and students.

But the very free speech ideal they demand is already practiced daily by students and faculty. UW-Madison is a place where students freely engage in debate and open table discussions about their beliefs. It is not only protected, but encouraged by professors, administrators and students themselves. When campus administrators adopt conservative talking points, they risk appearing to endorse those views rather than remain neutral, inadvertently legitimizing a manufactured problem.

Conservative beliefs that may have once gone unchallenged now are. But challenging someone's views in an academic environment is a part of open dialogue, not in opposition to it.

Former chair of the College Republicans Thomas Pyle [told The Daily Cardinal](#) in February 2024 that he and his conservative friends often suppress their political views in papers.

When pushed on whether professors ever suppress or limit conversation in classrooms, Pyle said, "I wouldn't say they've been stopped for their political views, but they've definitely been challenged."

When universities or students call out controversial or offensive speech, it holds others accountable and is an essential element of free speech expression.

In fact, it's often conservatives who embody the very practices and postures they are so quick to decry. Now that conservatives hold more social momentum, they are practicing "cancel culture."

After Charlie Kirk's murder, conservatives were quick to call for the firing of those whose speech they disagreed with. Conservatives celebrated the discipline of pro-Palestine protestors by major universities — including UW-Madison — as well as the deportation of those same protestors by the Trump administration.

Turning Point USA, the nation's preeminent conservative campus organization, runs a "Professor Watchlist" [online database](#) meant to "expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom." The site features hundreds of professors from across the country with searchable identifiers like "LGBTQ," "Terror Supporter," "Socialism" and "Racial Ideology."

At the end of the day, calls for "ideological diversity" or free speech are nothing more than an attempt to use conservatism as an escape from accountability and frame the proponents of those views as victims. Conservative groups want the ability to control the kinds of dialogue present on campus, not a truly open one.

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos' claim [Wisconsin campuses lack free speech](#) dismisses an essential truth: speech is free, but not from consequence, especially when it endangers others. The [call to protect "ideological diversity"](#) masks efforts to privilege one perspective over others.

Wisconsin Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) [hosted a panel](#) on these topics with conservative professors and state Rep. Dave Murphy, R-Hortonville, on Oct. 15. Panelists argued conservative ideology and voices are suppressed on campus.

While conservatives can point to survey data showing conservative students self-censor not all surveys are so clear cut. A [survey](#) run by the UW System president revealed of those who protest, only 10% of students claimed they've faced institutional consequences for engaging in political dialogue, with the actual implications of these consequences not being reported.

We here at The Daily Cardinal fully support free speech on our campus, but we also recognize when bad actors weaponize discussions around "ideological diversity" to suppress free and open dissent to their ideas.

Groups of all political stripes routinely hold campus events, invite speakers to campus and debate openly, all evidence that UW-Madison is a far cry from the ideological echo chamber it's being framed as. That ongoing exchange of ideas, while it may feel uncomfortable, is the backbone of the Wisconsin Idea, to apply classroom teachings to enhance the lives of state residents and the world beyond Madison.

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608-262-8000 · 2142 Vilas Communication Hall
821 University Avenue · Madison, Wis. 53706-1497

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