Free Speech, DEI, and Deplatforming: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract:
Introduction: In recent years, the number of deplatforming attempts has increased at universities. Deplatforming is an attempt to block a person from speaking when certain groups find their content to be objectionable. An institution's culture of free speech may affect the number of deplatforming incidents.
Methods: This study utilized data from a new database of deplatforming incidents on campus. The data were tested for correlations in relation to an institution's free speech ranking and its level of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) staffing.
Results: These initial results show a negative relationship between free speech ranking and deplatforming incidents, and a positive relationship between DEI staffing and deplatforming incidents.
Discussion: Institutions face the challenge of balancing an inclusive and equitable environment with the preservation of robust intellectual diversity and academic freedom. Finding this balance requires a thoughtful and deliberate approach that considers the nuances of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion while safeguarding the principles of free expression and open dialogue.
Limitations: These results were only for Power 5 universities in the United States. A more diverse sample may show different results.
Conclusions: The culture of an institution is related to the number of deplatforming incidents that take place. This culture can be examined via its commitment to free speech and to its DEI staffing levels. Initial results show that these two factors have a relationship with the number of deplatforming incidents.

Key words: free speech, deplatforming, DEI, higher education, viewpoint diversity.

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Introduction

While higher education should be a place to explore different ideas, there have been growing concerns about speech suppression on campus. Deplatforming is an attempt to block invited speeches, plays, artworks, or other modes of expression from occurring on a campus. Deplatforming shrinks the intellectual diversity of ideas and may lead to narrower thinking on various subjects (Naudé, 2021). Since 2020, deplatforming attempts on campuses have been on the rise (Gagliardi, 2023).

The amount of deplatforming incidents on a campus may be an indicator of the overall health of free speech within the academy. Deplatforming often occurs in the name of protecting marginalized groups, but it can also undermine the core purpose of higher education to promote critical inquiry and the free exchange of ideas. This paper will examine the relationships between the goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and free speech protections on college campuses, and deplatforming incidents (Ben-Porath, 2023).

This trend has raised significant concerns among scholars and activists regarding the impact on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within higher education institutions. Critics argue that deplatforming, while aiming to protect marginalized voices, can actually hinder the open exchange of ideas and limit the exposure to diverse perspectives. To develop future scholars, it is important for universities to engage in open exploration of ideas (Malík, 2023).

Deplatforming incidents have the potential to create an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship among both students and faculty. This inhibits the exploration of controversial or challenging topics, ultimately impeding the goal of fostering inclusive and intellectually stimulating environments. Deplatforming incidents not only stifle the free exchange of ideas but also create a chilling effect on academic discourse (Keck, 2023). When speakers are deplatformed, it sends a message that certain perspectives are not welcome or safe to be discussed, thereby fostering an environment of self-censorship and fear of backlash (Traunmüller, 2023).

Furthermore, the prioritization of preventing discomfort or offense over the robust discussion of contrasting viewpoints within academia is a point of contention. Bernstein suggests that instead of shutting down opposing voices, institutions should focus on equipping students with the critical thinking skills necessary to engage with and counter differing perspectives effectively (Bernstein et al., 2020).

As such, it is essential to critically analyze the impact of deplatforming on free speech, diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, considering both the intended and unintended consequences of such actions.

1   Literature review

This section reviews the existing literature in three parts: deplatforming and free speech concerns, understanding DEI staffing in higher education, and understanding deplatforming. All three areas are important for understanding the complex relationships between free speech, DEI, and deplatforming.

1.1 Deplatforming and free speech concerns

It is important to critically examine the concept of deplatforming and its relationships with free speech and diversity, equity, and inclusion. To better understand the impact of deplatforming on free speech and DEI initiatives, it is crucial to conduct a thorough analysis that takes into consideration the complexities of power dynamics, marginalized voices, and the potential consequences of silencing certain viewpoints (Norris, 2020).

A comprehensive analysis of deplatforming and its implications for free speech and DEI initiatives requires an examination of the power dynamics at play, the voices that are being silenced or marginalized, and the potential consequences for fostering a more inclusive and diverse intellectual environment on college campuses (Campus Deplatforming Database, 2024; Jhaver et al., 2021).

Free speech and DEI initiatives help shape the culture of a higher education institution. It is crucial to understand the delicate balance between safeguarding free speech and creating an inclusive environment that respects the diverse perspectives and experiences of all members of the community. This critical analysis aims to delve into the complexities surrounding deplatforming, including the justifications for and implications of silencing certain voices, as well as the potential impact on fostering an atmosphere that embraces a wide array of viewpoints (Shahverdian & Young, 2023).

Furthermore, the examination will explore the intersectionality of power dynamics and the voices that often bear the brunt of deplatforming efforts, shedding light on the potential consequences of suppressing these perspectives. By engaging in this analysis, we hope to uncover insights that can inform strategies for promoting open discourse while advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in academic settings (Duarte et al., 2014; Norris, 2021; Sousa & Clark, 2018). In conclusion, a comprehensive analysis of deplatforming and its implications for free speech and DEI initiatives is necessary in order to understand the complexities and potential consequences of silencing certain voices and to find a balanced approach that promotes both open discourse and inclusivity in higher education (Norris, 2020).

Recent years have witnessed a heated debate surrounding free speech, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and the practice of deplatforming. While some argue that free speech is a fundamental right that should be protected at all costs, others assert that certain forms of speech can perpetuate harm and discrimination,

therefore necessitating limitations and measures to promote inclusivity and protect marginalized communities (Norris, 2020).

It is often challenging to strike a balance between free speech and DEI principles, as both are integral to the mission of higher education institutions (Wallsten, 2023). However, it is important to approach this balance with careful consideration and thoughtful deliberation. This requires a nuanced and comprehensive analysis that takes into account the diverse perspectives, experiences, and needs of all individuals and communities affected by speech. By examining the role of DEI staffing levels and their potential impact on political tolerance, we can gain insights into the relationship between these initiatives and the suppression or promotion of certain voices on campus (Wallsten, 2023).

Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that deplatforming is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Contextual factors such as the nature of the content, the immediate and broader context, the historical setting, and who it is directed at must be considered (Cristofaro, 2022). While deplatforming can serve as a tool to address harmful speech and protect marginalized communities, it should be approached with caution to avoid unintended consequences such as creating echo chambers or stifling intellectual diversity (Wallsten, 2023). This requires ongoing dialogue, open forums, and inclusive spaces where diverse perspectives can be shared and engaged with. In conclusion, the relationship between free speech, DEI initiatives, and deplatforming is complex and multifaceted. It requires a nuanced approach that balances the principles of free expression with the goal of creating inclusive and equitable environments. In summary, the integration of DEI principles into institutions that value free speech can be a complex process (Strossen, 2023).

1.2 Understanding DEI staffing in higher education

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives have become increasingly prevalent within the higher education landscape, with institutions striving to create inclusive and equitable environments. However, the proliferation of DEI staffing levels has raised concerns about their impact on academic discourse and freedom of expression. Research aims to delve into the complexities of potential DEI bloat in the academy, shedding light on the potential implications for free speech and intellectual diversity (Greene & Paul, 2021). The growing presence of DEI bureaucracies on college campuses has led to a widespread perception that they may have a restrictive effect on free speech, particularly for conservative viewpoints.

DEI bureaucracies encompass a range of administrative structures and initiatives aimed at promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within academic institutions. ("DEI Statements Are Unreformable", 2024). While these efforts are rooted in

the noble objective of fostering inclusive environments, the expansion of DEI bureaucracies has prompted discussions about their influence on academic freedom and the exchange of diverse ideas.

One of the key concerns is the potential for DEI bureaucracies to inadvertently contribute to the suppression of certain voices and perspectives on campus (Hopper & Rice, 2021). By extensively regulating speech and creating a climate of hypersensitivity, these bureaucracies may inadvertently inhibit open dialogue and intellectual exchange, thus undermining the fundamental principles of free expression within a university setting.

Furthermore, the growth of DEI staffing has sparked debates about the allocation of resources and funding within academic institutions. Critics argue that the substantial investment in DEI initiatives may come at the expense of other academic priorities, potentially leading to a shift in institutional focus away from traditional academic pursuits.

Moreover, the bureaucratic nature of DEI initiatives has been criticized for its potential to create rigid frameworks that prescribe acceptable forms of expression and interaction. Some scholars and educators express concerns that the stringent enforcement of DEI policies and guidelines could stifle open discourse, academic freedom, and the free exchange of diverse ideas.

1.3 Understanding deplatforming

Deplatforming, as a practice, has sparked significant debate within higher education and broader societal contexts (Simpson, 2020). It involves the deliberate action of preventing a person or group from using a platform to express their views or engage with their audience. While deplatforming is often employed to counter harmful speech and protect marginalized communities, it raises complex considerations regarding free speech and DEI initiatives. One key consideration is how free speech is viewed by different communities (Wallsten, 2023). Deplatforming can help create safer spaces for marginalized communities by limiting the dissemination of harmful and oppressive speech. It involves the removal or exclusion of individuals or groups from platforms or forums where they were scheduled to speak or present their viewpoints. This practice has ignited intense discussions and disagreements, with proponents arguing that it is a necessary measure to counter harmful speech and protect marginalized communities, while opponents assert that it restricts free speech and diminishes the open exchange of diverse ideas.

Deplatforming can be a mechanism to address harmful or discriminatory content, thus aligning with the goals of fostering inclusive and equitable environments (Thomas & Wahedi, 2023). However, the practice also runs the risk of inadvertently stifling intellectual diversity and creating echo chambers. This

demands a careful examination of contextual factors, the nature of the content, and the potential consequences of silencing certain voices.

An analysis of deplatforming should also interrogate the power dynamics at play and the voices that are most affected by such actions. Moreover, it is essential to recognize the potential consequences of silencing marginalized perspectives and the broader impact on fostering an inclusive intellectual environment.

In conclusion, the examination of deplatforming and its implications for free speech and DEI initiatives provides crucial insights into the complexities of safeguarding free expression while promoting inclusivity and equity. With a comprehensive understanding of deplatforming, institutions can develop strategies that uphold free speech while fostering an environment that respects diverse perspectives.

2   Methods

For this analysis, we examined the relationship of two variables, free speech ranking and DEI staffing levels, on deplatforming incidents. The goal was to understand how these factors shape students' attitudes towards allowing controversial speakers on campus. How a university cultures values free speech and DEI could potentially impact the level of deplatforming incidents that occur.

One way to measure the level of free speech protection at an institution is the rankings provided by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (https://www.thefire.org/college-free-speech-rankings). FIRE's free speech rankings assess the level of free speech protection and institutional commitment to open discourse on college campuses across the United States.

FIRE's rankings provide a valuable insight into how universities prioritize and uphold free expression. By examining these rankings, institutions can gain an understanding of their standing in promoting an environment that values diverse viewpoints and open dialogue. Moreover, the rankings can serve as a benchmark for evaluating the efficacy of free speech policies and practices within academic settings.

FIRE's assessment encompasses various aspects of free speech protection, including policies related to student and faculty expression, campus speech codes, and institutional commitments to fostering an atmosphere that embraces intellectual diversity. Understanding a university's positioning in these rankings can offer valuable insights into the intersection of free speech and DEI principles, guiding efforts to navigate the complexities of safeguarding free expression while advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

FIRE has also recently released a deplatforming database (Introducing FIRE's Campus Deplatforming Database, 2024) that tracks instances of deplatforming attempts on college campuses. This database can serve as a valuable resource for researchers and administrators alike in understanding the prevalence and impact

of deplatforming incidents. The deplatforming database is used here as a novel data source.

The third data source is the DEI staffing levels as previously reported by Greene and Paul (2021). This research estimated the number of DEI personnel per 100 faculty at Power 5 universities. Power 5 universities are the universities that compete in the main five athletic conferences in college sports. While the size and makeup of these 65 universities is different, they are all in a similar class as far having substantial resources for many different college initiatives.

Two separate correlation analyses were performed. The first correlation analysis was for the relationship between an institution's free speech ranking and the number of deplatforming incidents. The results of this correlation are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Relationship between FIRE ranking and deplatforming incidents

	FIRE	*Deplatforming incidents*
FIRE	1	
Deplatforming incidents	-0.29529076	1

For the second correlation analysis, the relationship between DEI staffing levels and deplatforming incidents was analyzed. These results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Relationship between deplatforming incidents and DEI staffing levels

	Deplatforming incidents	*DEI per 100 Faculty*
Deplatforming incidents	1	
DEI per 100 Faculty	0.233148244	1

These initial results show a negative relationship between free speech ranking and deplatforming incidents, and a positive relationship between DEI staffing and deplatforming incidents. These results will now be discussed more thoroughly.

3 Discussion

In conducting our correlation analysis, we employed statistical methods to explore the potential relationships between free speech ranking, DEI staffing levels, and their relationship with deplatforming incidents. The analysis was for 65 Power 5 universities in the United States. Our analysis aimed to uncover

insights into how these variables may influence students' attitudes towards the allowance of controversial speakers on campus.

The first correlation analysis showed a negative relationship between an institution's free speech ranking and the number of deplatforming incidents. This might seem likely, given that an institution that works to protect free speech would try to make sure all viewpoints are treated equally. This would make it more likely that a controversial speaker would be allowed on campus, even though some members of the university do not like the viewpoints being presented.

The positive correlation between DEI staffing and more deplatforming incidents is harder to determine. It could be that more DEI staff make campus members more sensitive to opposing viewpoints. Therefore, increased DEI staffing could potentially create an environment where deplatforming becomes more frequent.

However, there could be other variables which drive both DEI staffing and deplatforming incidents. Perhaps an institution has a long history of student protests. This institutional momentum could lead to both more DEI staff being hired and to more deplatforming incidents as well.

It is important to note that these correlations do not show any causation. With additional data, a more comprehensive statistical analysis could show the interrelationships between free speech, DEI staffing, and deplatforming incidents. This initial analysis is based on publicly available data to begin understanding these relationships.

As we delve deeper and interpret the results, it is essential to consider the multifaceted nature of these relationships and their implications for fostering an inclusive and intellectually diverse environment within higher education institutions. The correlation analysis will help illuminate the intricate connections between free speech, DEI initiatives, and viewpoint tolerance, offering valuable perspectives on how these elements intersect and potentially impact the broader discourse on campus.

In navigating the complexities of DEI bureaucracies, institutions face the challenge of balancing the imperative to foster inclusive and equitable environments with the preservation of robust intellectual diversity and academic freedom. Finding this balance requires a thoughtful and deliberate approach that considers the nuances of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion while safeguarding the principles of free expression and open dialogue.

As institutions grapple with the implications of DEI staffing on free speech and intellectual diversity, it is imperative to engage in constructive dialogue and critically assess the impact of these administrative structures. By fostering transparent and inclusive conversations, universities can work towards developing strategies that uphold the values of both diversity and free expression within the academic community.

A critical aspect of the analysis involves evaluating the influence of DEI staffing on viewpoint tolerance among students and faculty. By examining the correlation between the expansion of DEI staffing levels and the attitudes towards controversial speakers on campus, it is possible to gain insights into the potential impact of these initiatives on the acceptance of diverse viewpoints and free expression within the academic community.

The relationship between DEI principles and free speech necessitates a delicate balance, requiring institutions to navigate the complexities of safeguarding free expression while advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is essential to recognize that while DEI initiatives are integral to creating inclusive environments, they must not come at the cost of stifling intellectual diversity and impeding the open exchange of ideas.

The intersection of free speech, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and deplatforming presents a compelling area for future research within the context of higher education. As institutions continue to grapple with the challenges and opportunities related to these interconnected facets, it becomes imperative to delve deeper into several key areas that warrant investigation and analysis.

By examining these variables, we sought to discern any patterns or connections that could shed light on the interplay between free speech advocacy, the implementation of DEI initiatives, and the tolerance for diverse viewpoints on college campuses. This approach involved statistical analyses to identify significant correlations and potential trends that could inform our understanding of the complex dynamics at play. The findings from the correlation analysis will contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discourse surrounding the delicate balance between free speech and DEI principles in academic settings.

Conclusions

The correlation analysis endeavors to provide an initial step to the ongoing dialogue on the complexities of free speech, diversity, equity, and inclusion within the academic sphere. We aim to highlight the correlations between these variables but also underscore their implications for promoting open discourse and inclusivity in higher education.

The findings revealed a complex interplay between free speech ranking, DEI staffing levels, and deplatforming incidents. While a higher free speech ranking was associated with fewer deplatforming incidents, the presence of robust DEI staffing was found to correlate with more deplatforming incidents.

These insights underscore the importance of adopting a nuanced approach to integrating DEI principles with the protection of free speech. Both free speech commitment and DEI initiatives can influence the development of an intellectually vibrant and inclusive educational environment. However, the convergence of these principles requires careful and deliberate consideration of

power dynamics, marginalized voices, and the potential impact on fostering a more diverse and equitable intellectual atmosphere on college campuses.

The relationship between DEI initiatives, free speech, and deplatforming on college campuses is complex and requires a balanced approach that values both open expression and inclusive environments ("Freedom of Speech: At What Cost?", 2018). In light of the multifaceted nature of the relationship between DEI initiatives, free speech, and deplatforming on college campuses, it is evident that fostering an environment that values both open expression and inclusivity is crucial (Whittington, 2018). The insights from the correlation analysis emphasize the need for a balanced approach that respects diverse perspectives while upholding the principles of free speech.

Moving forward, institutions of higher education can use these findings to inform their strategies for creating inclusive and equitable environments that encourage open discourse (Warners, 2021). By acknowledging the complexities revealed in the correlation analysis, universities can develop comprehensive policies and practices that prioritize both free speech and DEI initiatives, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected ("Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech", 2018), ("Free Speech and Intellectual Diversity", 2019).

Moreover, it is essential for academic communities to continue engaging in ongoing dialogue, open forums, and inclusive spaces where diverse viewpoints can be shared and discussed (Warners, 2021). This commitment to open conversation and the respectful exchange of ideas will contribute to the cultivation of a more intellectually diverse and inclusive environment within higher education institutions (Svrluga, 2023).

In conclusion, the relationship between free speech, DEI initiatives, and deplatforming is multi-faceted and requires an approach that balances the principles of open expression with the goal of creating inclusive and equitable environments. The findings from this analysis provide valuable insights that can inform strategies for promoting open discourse while advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in academic settings. Moreover, it highlights the need for continuous dialogue, open forums, and inclusive spaces where diverse perspectives can be shared and engaged with.

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