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broadening and deepening epistemic communities in response to university censorship

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This article describes the impact of affective and belief polarization on growing direct and indirect censorship in institutions of higher education. While conventional responses to censorship often rely on appeals to free speech based on individualist rights claims, this article calls for an alternative response: broadening and deepening learning communities. It argues that universities should focus on cultivating trust, fostering collaborative inquiry, and embracing a wide array of evidence and perspectives in order to fulfill their epistemic and civic missions. In doing so, universities can resist the narrowing of knowledge caused by polarization and censorship, and instead model the conditions necessary for improved learning and healthy democracy. While this article focuses largely on censorship in the United States, the educational recommendations extend beyond its borders.

Keywords: censorship, epistemic communities, higher education, polarization, political epistemology

Introduction

University faculty and students returned to campuses in 2025 under new state legislation and federal executive orders that restrict what professors may teach and how students engage in political life on campuses in the United States. These constraints are widespread; by mid year, sixteen Republican-controlled states had enacted similar legislation, and bills had been considered in ten more (Benitez et al., 2025). While these measures are often framed as promoting intellectual diversity, they function in practice as mechanisms of direct and indirect censorship. They reflect growing conservative distrust of universities and fears that professors may be indoctrinating particular progressive viewpoints. Although this article focuses on higher education, similar legislation has been approved or considered for elementary and secondary schools in a comparable number of states, as well as additional restrictions related to banning books and other curricular materials (Modan, 2024). While the particular censorship practices and laws may differ in other democracies around the world, many share similarities in their sources and their impact, which I trace here in my American context. Perhaps more unique to the American context, however, it should be noted that the censorship described in universities is situated within increasing forms of constraint within the United States, including prohibitions on flag burning, efforts to revise historical materials in museums, removal of artifacts and historical references from federal websites, and calls to remove artwork from national exhibits. That setting intensifies the concerns described here that might otherwise appear more benign.

While there are an array of reasons for expanded censorship in universities, I focus in this article on the role of polarization as one significant cause.[1] I draw attention to how this growing political

phenomenon may undermine the epistemic and civic mission of universities. Polarization limits our epistemic communities by narrowing the range of perspectives considered legitimate and erodes the trust needed for collaborative knowledge-building. In response, I claim universities must cultivate broader and deeper epistemic communities that encourage epistemic cooperation, humility, listening, and civility – the very sorts of epistemic conditions that facilitate political practices aligned with a better functioning, less polarized democracy (Serrano-Zamora, 2026). While I begin my discussion by analyzing recent censorship in the United States, I believe that my resulting educational recommendations apply to contexts beyond its borders.

I engage in political epistemology, exploring how knowledge is shaped by political practices, policies, and institutions. In this case, that includes educational institutions that are now subject to censorship, bans, and other epistemic constraints that shift how knowledge is developed, accessed, critiqued, and shared (Herzog, 2024). I begin by explaining how polarization leads to censorship, both inside and outside of one's political tribe. I then consider typical responses to censorship, which tend to be individualist and don't help us attend to our collective epistemic and political needs. I close by describing how, in response to censorship, universities should be working to expand epistemic communities and foster collaborative inquiry and trust instead. In doing so, universities can resist the narrowing of knowledge caused by polarization and censorship, and instead model the conditions necessary for improved learning and healthy democracy.

Legislation and Censorship

Much of the recent state legislation purports to promote the goal of intellectual diversity, defining it as "multiple, divergent, and varied perspectives on an extensive range of public policy issues" (Advance Ohio Higher Education Act, 2025). On its surface, this appears to be a worthy aim, but looking more closely at its details and implications reveals that the legislation sometimes functions as a mechanism of epistemic control, rather than truly promoting an array of viewpoints. My state of Ohio requires that all students "reach their own conclusions about all controversial beliefs or policies" (Advance Ohio Higher Education Act, 2025). The particular controversial beliefs or policies that are listed in the law as especially worthy of protection tend to be politically one-sided. This includes climate policy, marriage, abortion, immigration policy, and diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. These are issues where legislators assume that conservative views are underappreciated in academic settings. While ostensibly affirming the autonomy of the student to make up their own mind about these issues, this individualist framing neglects the relational and dialogic nature of knowledge production and belief formation. Moreover, the named beliefs and policies are under heightened scrutiny, warning that professors should not inculcate particular views regarding them, regardless of whether those views may be substantiated by virtue of being codified in law, upheld by disciplinary consensus, supported by empirical evidence, or by some other criteria used to determine whether an issue is settled (Drerup, 2022; Hand, 2008; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). That is not to say that emphasizing those more substantiated views should exempt alternatives from conversation or debate, but it is to say that there are some views that are more legitimated by the processes and standards of academic communities that may be silenced or belittled by legislation that seems to put all views of every individual on an equal playing field.

In light of the demand for intellectual diversity in the legislation, some interpret these laws as compelling professors to allow (at minimum) or provide (at maximum) multiple viewpoints on these issues, even if the divergent views may not be supported by evidence or have the widespread support of researchers. Similarly, professors, who choose to wade into such issues at all, fear that

they must allow the views of students to go unchecked or unchallenged, as legislation now requires that professors be evaluated based on student feedback that asks them to rate professors regarding the extent to which they "encouraged…varying opinions" and maintained classrooms that were free from bias (Advance Ohio Higher Education Act, 2025). What may seem to be an admirable effort to curb bias or indoctrination may actually play out as a limitation on what professors say and teach, as many are afraid to even broach the subjects or be perceived as privileging some views on them over others. Seeking safety in silence, opportunities to take up some of society's most pressing public matters and develop solutions to them are lost in our classrooms.

Some states have defunded academic programs whose coursework teaches or embraces viewpoints not supported by the conservatives in charge. This includes banning courses on critical race theory and gender theory. In some cases, new policies go so far as to define underlying concepts, such as 'sex', 'female', and 'male', thereby preventing those concepts from even being matters of academic debate, despite their longstanding history as such in fields including sociology and gender studies (Public K-12 and Postsecondary Schools; Prohibit DEI Statements and Practices, 2025). This is a form of epistemic foreclosure: a limiting of inquiry through legal and ideological fiat.

In laws across the country and in dictates from the President, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, theories, and trainings are banned, and universities are forbidden from making any student "feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex" (Advance Ohio Higher Education Act, 2025). Concerned with provoking these sorts of emotional response, some professors avoid introducing theories that might provoke internal reflection on a student's racial or gender identity, thereby blocking philosophical, psychological, anthropological, historical, and other theories related to identity from the classroom. I have done this personally by removing a course reading about critical whiteness theory and pedagogies of discomfort from one course and a book chapter about the use of a racial slur by white educators in early American curriculum from another.

Some of the state laws also dial back the protections of tenure and related aspects of academic freedom. These matter not just for protecting professors in the classroom, but also in their research outside of the classroom. The state laws are exacerbated by an executive order from the President which explicitly targets "far-left initiatives" by enabling political appointees overseeing research funding reviews to restrict access to federal research funding for professors whose research is deemed out of alignment with the administration's "priorities and the national interest" (Trump, 2025d). This comes on the heels of an executive order authored on the first day of Trump's second administration, which led many previously approved grants to be terminated because they employed identity-related words or focused on particular identity groups (Trump, 2025a).

On the same day, President Trump issued an executive order responding to government censorship of mis- and disinformation, much of it related to pandemic debates prior to his second election, that was typically shared on social media platforms. The order asserted the importance of free speech and declared a commitment to "ending federal censorship" (Trump, 2025c). Indeed, many conservatives were rightly upset that some forms of legitimate discussion about scientific evidence and public policies related to disease transmission were curtailed by being flagged or banned from social media. Such censorship prevented full consideration of viewpoints from a significant portion of the population as well as discussion of concerns about Covid policies deemed infeasible or too restrictive. This censorship prevented scientists and public policymakers from being fully responsive to the needs and input of the public.

While the Trump administration seems to abhor censorship in this executive order, other orders and actions effectively censor (directly or indirectly) what professors teach and how students engage on campuses, especially regarding issues not aligned with the political ideology of the administration. Even private social media posts viewed by some as inappropriate reactions to the murder of conservative Charlie Kirk have been grounds for removing faculty from their teaching duties. In this example, state legislators threatened defunding public universities where faculty made posts the legislators found unacceptable. This form of censorship seems to be trickling down from the President to state legislators and extending its reach beyond campus speech to private speech online.[2]

New legislation is also directed at students. Campuses, long-celebrated as spaces of political dissent and exchange of competing political views, are increasingly silenced as new policies and executive orders threaten students with expulsion, detainment, or deportation for engaging in certain political activity (Gourevitch, 2025). One justification provided for these responses is that some protests have broken laws about the timing or location of their protest. Taking up this view on Truth Social on March 4, 2025, Trump said,

> "All Federal Funding will STOP for any College, School, or University that allows illegal protests. Agitators will be imprisoned/or permanently sent back to the country from which they came. American students will be permanently expelled or, depending on the crime, arrested."

Another reason for restricting protests is that some protestors have expressed antisemitic views that Jewish peers have experienced as threatening. Indeed, conservative critics are right to raise concerns about potentially hostile campus environments, as such conditions prevent the welcoming and equitable treatment of all learners that is necessary for personal learning and contributing to the development of wider knowledge. Increasingly difficult, however, has been parsing out when some protestors have raised legitimate critiques of Israel's actions in Gaza and when they are merely voicing antisemitism. Given the considerable punishments that may result, students may fear raising justified critiques.

A 2025 executive order calls for more extensive vetting of international students and restrictions on visas if students engage in some campus protests or express political views contrary to the administration's position (Florido, 2025; Trump, 2025b). Some international students who participated in campus protests or penned letters to the school newspaper were taken by masked government agents and detained for their political speech (Fadel, 2025; Patel et al., 2025). Other international students, including one of my own doctoral students, have had their social media screened for posts that render them "inadmissible" to the country, even though the precise criteria for such a determination is not given beyond mentioning that this may include posts indicating security risks (*Announcement of Expanded Screening and Vetting for H-1B and Dependent H-4 Visa Applicants*, 2025). Even American students face being expelled for voicing disfavored political views or participating in certain types of protests. Other changes are occurring at local levels. For example, students at the Ohio State University were recently banned from using chalk to write messages on sidewalks and buildings around campus, a longstanding practice for advertising events like campus group meetings and demonstrations, but also expressing political views (Ohio State University, 2025). Collectively, these efforts have a chilling effect, where students curb their speech

out of fear.

Polarization and Censorship

Universities have two interwoven missions. A primary mission of the university is epistemic: to build and strengthen knowledge, both individual and collective. This knowledge serves the interests of the student (as they seek to understand the world, gain employment, and more), while also developing broader understanding of the world through advanced research and inquiry. The mission of the university is also civic: it is concerned with fostering relationships that enable us to find solutions to our shared problems and live together well (Bridgeland et al., 2024; Gutmann, 1999). As such, universities nurture the knowledge, skills, and dispositions individual students need to participate well in civic reasoning and collective problem-solving.[3] Universities cultivate empirical and rational argumentation to ground political discourse about leaders, policies, and problems, thereby supporting democratic legitimacy and heading off false beliefs or unjustified public reasoning. Universities blend these goals because emphasizing only knowledge building without public engagement or accountability tends toward technocracy and elitism, while emphasizing only civic engagement without sophisticated and rigorous epistemic basis could undermine informed decision-making and over-privilege populist action. Working together, these missions uphold both individual and common goods.

In our polarized context, we are increasingly struggling to fulfill those missions. Polarization distorts our academic practices, making it harder to distinguish what is factually accurate and leading us to preference some knowledge over others based on our political leanings. Polarization impacts both how we respond to worldviews from both inside and outside of our political tribe, curtailing and manipulating our ability to take in information from and work together with citizens who may differ from us. Polarization shapes which people and ideas are included or excluded from the public sphere and academic debate.[4] Polarization derails endeavors to determine the truth and our relational ability to build knowledge with fellow citizens.

Affective polarization is marked by distrust and hostility toward opposing political groups. Affective political polarization drives us away from competing groups, preventing us from effectively interacting with or learning from them. We cut them off as epistemic resources and partners in learning. Belief polarization leads citizens toward more extreme views, often based on perceived group consensus rather than evidence. Corroboration from one's tribe encourages a member to feel that they are part of the group, urging them to become more committed to the belief, which, in turn, may goad them to intensify their views and shift toward more extreme beliefs (Jost et al., 2022; Rekker & Harteveld, 2024; Talisse, 2019, 2021). "From the standpoint of that intensified outlook, opposing views and countervailing considerations are bound to appear distorted, feeble, ill-founded, and extraneous" (Talisse, 2019, p. 118). Belief and affective polarization cause citizens to be unable to recognize the legitimacy of competing perspectives or engage with them rationally. Such polarization reshapes our epistemic architecture, constructing barriers between groups and sometimes building unsubstantiated positions. They narrow our range of epistemic inputs and thereby undermine the quality of the knowledge produced.

Universities (and society as a whole) need free inquiry and exchange of ideas in order for relevant information to circulate, ideas to develop, and knowledge to be assessed. Polarization can lead us to too quickly write off competing views as wrongheaded or misinformation. But sometimes, rather than just ignoring or discarding what others have to say, polarization can provoke us to go even

farther to actively constrain or censor such speech. Polarization propels some people to call for censorship and restrictions on what is said, taught, or studied out of disdain for the competing political tribe and suspicion about them, including their motives and ethical orientations. We fear that what the other group says or teaches may be harmful in some way because we see the group as corrupt, bad, or dangerous. For example, in one executive order, President Trump depicts what he calls "absurd ideologies" of the "far-left," noting their misuse of government funding for what he cites as harmful and immoral research, as he calls for an end to funding such studies, effectively rendering much of that research no longer financially viable, thereby terminating it (Trump, 2025d).

On campuses, polarization may lead us to strive to silence some of the particular views held by the competing group, but also particular speakers (including invited speakers and student protestors). Here, matters of trust influence which knowledge and thinkers we believe and uphold. In the United States, professors, categorically viewed as Leftists by the President, have been labelled "the enemy" by the Vice President (Poisson, 2025). Seeing them as enemies to be vanquished justifies censoring progressive views and those who teach them. Moreover, it may lead polarized groups to dig in their heels on asserting and teaching some particular positions, foreclosing open-ended inquiry. For example, in my state, concerns that professors were teaching Marxist views led conservative lawmakers to require all students to now learn about capitalism and to read a particular historical text celebrating it (Advance Ohio Higher Education Act, 2025). In another example across the United States, a pro-Israel stance may be directly asserted or indirectly affirmed through threats to punish pro-Palestinian demonstrators, thereby preventing careful study of the conflict between Israel and Palestine in classes or elsewhere on campus. Polarization leads to limited, distorted, or derailed understanding because it clouds or curtails our epistemic resources, narrowing them to particular predetermined views.

But polarization doesn't stop there; it can lead us to censor outliers in our own political group. We become suspicious of naysayers, skeptics, and dissenters (Talisse, 2019). We expect others to toe the line, even as belief polarization pushes it farther to the extremes. Echo chambers and bias confirmation reaffirm for us that our political tribe is right, pushing us to ignore, question, or even silence our comrades who disagree. Polarization makes us not only disregard the evidence, but may lead us to censor those who present such evidence, foreclosing our ability to learn from the evidence and the person presenting it. Polarization, then, inhibits not just opportunities for learning and epistemic development, but also civic opportunities for engaging in reasoning together to address shared problems.

Typical and Alternative Responses to Censorship

Conventional responses to censorship are individualist in nature, typically seeing censorship as an infringement on the personal right to free speech (McHangama, 2022; Turley, 2024; Warburton, 2009). These responses, rooted in free speech jurisprudence or natural rights theory, emphasize the autonomy of the speaker and the protection of conscience from state interference. Though these defenses are important, they fail to attend to the epistemic and civic harms of censorship because they neglect the relational dimensions of learning and decision-making. Ulrich Baer warns, "The conservative definition of absolute speech rights on campus amount to a strong defense of individualism and autonomy. But it is an abstract and rather limited conception of the individual outside of a specific social or political context" (Baer, 2019, p. 105). I suggest instead that we must draw attention to the polarized context of the university and its mission, situating the individual in an interconnected network of learners. Doing so helps us to better understand all that is at risk due

to recent censorship, reveals the interconnectedness of learning and sharing ideas, and leads us to defend speech in ways that are better aligned with the epistemic and civic missions of universities.

Censorship tends to focus on limiting the exposure of students to particular information or worldviews. This presumes that students are merely receivers of information or that they simply independently aggregate knowledge from other sources, rather than seeing students as thinkers who actively shape and craft knowledge, including in cooperative ways with others. We should emphasize different grounds for pushing back against censorship. Let's recast the problem in terms of valuing the interdependence of learners and cooperation across different groups in seeking truth and building knowledge.

In this view, speech is valuable not merely as an expression of personal autonomy or conscience, but because it enables communities to construct and critique knowledge together. Ultimately then, censorship is not just a violation of personal rights, but a limitation on the epistemic networks that enable civic reasoning and democratic decision-making. Whereas some may call for universities to be neutral spaces where free speech claims are aired, I am suggesting instead that universities must actively provide and encourage conditions that nurture epistemic cooperation. This sort of work is guided by norms of inclusivity in inquiry, inviting people and perspectives into the classroom and on to campuses, rather than silencing or banning them. It also includes exposing students to new ideas that may challenge their tribal loyalties by engaging students with counterevidence and carving out space for consideration of dissenting views. It requires modeling intellectual humility, curiosity, and courage. Rather than efforts to carve out "free speech zones" where students can protest or express themselves without disturbing others, my call extends into classrooms, auditoriums, and research labs. It shapes how students learn to seek and share knowledge with others, emphasizing the epistemic and civic aims of universities.

In response to overt and covert censorship that narrows who is trusted and which views are fully considered, universities should be working to expand and deepen epistemic communities. Universities offer a key space for nurturing epistemic networks and demonstrating their positive impact on achieving greater understanding and improved solutions to shared problems. Calls to end censorship should point toward those networks and their positive social consequences, emphasizing the pedagogical conditions under which speech contributes to truth-seeking and democratic life.

Campus Practices and Pedagogy

Recent state legislation is right to call for intellectual diversity, but rather than a mere Republican dog whistle, it should herald a deep commitment to bringing an array of voices and perspectives to the table.[5] As we seek to understand the world around us and solve the problems we face within it, we need to hear from and about an array of experiences and evidence. Diversity of viewpoints must be accompanied by university policies and practices that affirm the equal worth of all inquiry participants—a position aligned with their epistemic and civic missions (Ben-Porath, 2023; Roth, 2019).

One way to bring greater intellectual diversity to campus is through invited speakers who represent a range of perspectives. Yet, in our polarized contexts, such invitations tend to provoke affective responses that mirror political divisions off campus. Sometimes students may rightfully find the content of the speaker's views incorrect or even offensive, or they may presume this to be the case before even hearing what the speaker has to say. The temptation may be to "cancel" speakers by

shouting over them, but this can be just another form of polarized censorship. Instead, universities should make contested speakers and responses to them on campus educative by helping students to understand how affective polarization may be at work in their responses, how it may push them to distrust the speaker or may urge them to adopt even more extreme counterviews. Universities can provide educative resources that help students understand how speech works politically and epistemically (including its potential harms). Universities might also encourage speakers to not only articulate their positions, but also explain how they came to hold those views, helping the audience to understand the reasoning and values that underlie them as well as the networks of thinkers that have given rise to them.

While universities should cast a wide net as they invite campus speakers, there may be justified reasons for occasionally excluding some and those reasons may stem from the mission of higher education. Universities should share openly their rationales for excluding those speakers, especially because such actions may appear to be unjustified censorship at work. For example, a university might decide to exclude a speaker who champions views that run counter to respecting the equal worth of all members of the academic community as humans and learners. A white supremacist might claim that people of color are intellectually inferior, preventing people of color on campus from being able to fairly engage in the conversation because they are not granted initial equal standing. In limited cases, excluding such speakers recognizes both civic commitments to political equality as well as epistemic commitments to all students being able to fully participate in exchanging ideas. Notably, here free speech is viewed not just in terms of the rights of the speaker to assert their views, but also in terms of the ability of the academic community to participate in interacting with and building knowledge from those views. It considers the epistemic and relational nature of campus speakers.

In addition to invited speakers, universities can employ assignments and pedagogical approaches that foster the sorts of conditions that enable students to be exposed to unanticipated ideas and viewpoints, pushing beyond those commonly accepted in their political tribes. Examples include assigning readings exploring views uncommon on campus and requiring students to explore evidence that counters the view they hold. This expands epistemic communities and taps into a richer array of learning resources. Alongside these efforts, universities must help students understand psychological, sociological, and political phenomena that limit quality reasoning, such as understanding the backfire effect, which may lead students to double down on faulty views when presented with contrary evidence by those they distrust.

Additionally, universities must affirm the epistemic and civic value of protest. Universities should teach about how dissent can positively challenge the status quo, bringing forward new and better ideas (Stitzlein, 2014). Moreover, universities can demonstrate how engaging in political protest can itself be a form of learning, where groups do collective inquiry into public problems and imagine alternative solutions (Medina, 2023). Sigal Ben-Porath further adds, “Higher education institutions serve as civic labs, where young people are invited to develop their values and beliefs and to learn to act in coordination with others to organize, mobilize, and promote various social and civic causes” (Ben-Porath, 2023, p. 50). In this regard, universities should care about campus protests and their censorship both because protest contributes to knowledge and civic decision-making, but also because protest presents another opportunity for learning together with others. Protests are a process through which students arrive at a better understanding of who they are and what they believe.

Dissenting views on campus should not then just be relegated to the sidelines (or “free speech

zones"), but rather brought into the classroom as fodder for consideration, enabling non-dissenters to witness and learn from their peers. Universities can also highlight dissent within groups to help reveal complexity and contestation, thereby pushing back on the ingroup silencing of polarization. Universities can expose multiplicities within protest groups, which may raise differing issues or insights. Universities can teach skills of listening and response so that students learn how to really hear and take up the dissent that is uttered on campus.

Censorship is an instantiation of distrust. In addition to widening epistemic communities, we also need to deepen them in terms of building trust between citizens, across political groups, in scientific inquiry, and in institutions of learning. This requires, at its start, acknowledging the political equality of all citizens and, ideally, concern for their inclusion in decision-making and concern for their well-being in the outcomes of those decisions, including their inclusion in the knowledge-building of universities that shapes those decisions.

One way to deepen epistemic communities and support the civic mission of universities is to develop skills of civility, whether that be through overt coursework about civility or as an orientation to learning across all disciplines on campus.[6] Civility entails matters of speech and communication, including humility and listening, which position us to be open to critique and to learn from others. These two skills are particularly at risk in a polarized context, where we are quick to assert the views of our tribe without even pausing to listen to alternative views. Universities can slow students down to help them see the limitations in their own views and flaws in their reasoning, while also helping students to clarify and strengthen their views. This sort of careful investigation of one's own view and one's own tribe may reveal that there are good-faith disagreements with the domination position of their political group. Humility keeps us attuned to differing and dissenting views and it can help to head off groupthink that prevents good decision-making (Hastie & Sunstein, 2015). This keeps our reasoning broad and adaptive, rather than a narrow and fixed pitting of one group or perspective against another.

Campuses that foreground humility encourage students and professors to consider criticisms raised by their opponents. To do so, they must listen generously and with a spirit of curiosity and openness, as they genuinely try to understand, rather than debate or defeat others. Given that many students today self-censor out of fear of being out of step with their professors and, especially, their peers, universities should be focused on creating the conditions where participants feel safe so that they can speak openly. This means nurturing courage, care, and shared fate within and between students. Universities should seek to position students to be open to hearing alternative viewpoints and encountering new evidence in ways that may lead to "civic epiphanies." Philosopher of education, Doug Yacek, describes these as "moments in which we recognize the humanity of those we had previously considered our political enemies" (Yacek, 2019, p. 424). Rachel Wahl's campus conversations following the Unite the Right rally demonstrate ways that students may come to see the humanity in those with whom they disagree (Wahl, in press).

Humility and listening pave the way for civility. I do not mean some sort of civility as mere politeness. I am referring to a form of civility as a commitment to ongoing dialogue that enables strong and heated disagreement, but does so while recognizing that those on the other side are political equals worthy of consideration (Danisch & Keith, 2024; Keith & Danisch, 2020). In this way, we can truly take up the arguments of others and enable a form of intellectual diversity that the sort of censorship-inducing laws recently approved can never achieve. Moreover, witnessing the epistemic and civic gains from civil reasoning together, we head off the polarized temptation to call

for censorship.

Conclusion

Affective and belief polarization are limiting the scope of legitimate academic inquiry and distorting the ability to reason together. Censorship on college campuses is both a consequence of such polarization and a strategy for furthering it. Typical responses to censorship that emphasize the free speech rights of individual students and guest speakers or the academic freedom of professors, fails to adequately account for or address polarization. Instead, universities should highlight the potential for democratizing and cooperative epistemology, where knowledge is built together and used to ensure mutual well-being. Polarization-induced censorship separates learners from other inquirers and ideas, setting up competition of viewpoints rather than cooperation in knowledge construction and assessment. Universities should emphasize the social connectivity of knowledge-building and truth-validation in order to tie epistemology with democratization. Universities need to build broader and deeper epistemic communities, thereby providing not only protections for free speech, but also an infrastructure for better knowledge development and civic reasoning. In doing so, universities can resist the narrowing of knowledge caused by polarization and censorship, and instead they can better fulfill their epistemic and civic missions as they model the conditions necessary for improved learning and healthy democracy.

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1. To be clear, I am not saying that only polarization leads to censorship, for clearly authoritarian leadership and other phenomena may also contribute.
2. https://www.wyff4.com/article/clemson-university-employees-social-media-posts/66111510 and https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/academic-freedom/2025/09/12/6-more-faculty-staff-removed-kirk-comments
3. I worked with the National Academy of Education to define civic reasoning and its requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions in Lee et al. (2021).
4. Sigal Ben-Porath also detects the influence of polarization on censorship (Lee et al., 2021).
5. The point is not, however, to encourage all or as many different views as possible to be sincerely taken up in educational spaces, for some have already failed basic tests of logic or empiricism, others are morally abhorrent, and more.
6. Some universities have begun offering or requiring coursework on civility (Crawford, 2024).