

Administration of Donald J. Trump, 2019

**Remarks on Signing an Executive Order on Improving Free Inquiry,
Transparency, and Accountability at Colleges and Universities**

March 21, 2019

The President. Thank you very much. Please be seated. I am truly delighted to welcome so many impressive young Americans to the White House. This is a very exciting day. What we're doing is very important. And we're here to take historic action to defend American students and American values. They've been under siege.

In a few moments, I will be signing an Executive order to protect free speech on college campuses. Just the thought of it sounds good. We're grateful—[*applause*]. It's true. True.

We're very grateful to be joined today by Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. Betsy? Where are you, Betsy? Hi, Betsy. [*Laughter*] And Secretary of Health and Human Services, who has done a really great job—we have prescription drug prices coming down, first time in 51 years, so—Alex Azar. Thank you very much, Alex.

Most importantly, let me thank all of the college students and recent graduates here with me on stage. Incredible young people. These courageous Americans have stood up for [to]^{*} the forces of political indoctrinations—and they really stood up to it too, like very few people have been able to—censorship, and coercion.

You refused to be silenced by powerful institutions and closed-minded critics, of which there are many. You faced down intimidation, pressure and abuse. You did it because you love your country and you believe in truth, justice, and freedom. And I want to thank you all, everybody in the room, including a lot of folks in the audience. Charlie. A lot of folks,

You've fought bravely for your rights and now you have a President who is also fighting for you. I'm with you all the way. Okay? All right? [*Applause*] All right?

In America, the very heart of the university's mission is preparing students for life as citizens in a free society. But even as universities have received billions and billions of dollars from taxpayers, many have become increasingly hostile to free speech and to the First Amendment. You see it all the time.

You turn on the news, and you see things that are horrible. You see people being punched hard in the face. But he didn't go down. [*Laughter*] He didn't go down. I said, "You have a better chin than Muhammad Ali, and he had a great chin." [*Laughter*] And you see the cowbell scene. You saw that horrible scene. That was a disgraceful thing at a school, at a university.

Under the guise of "speech codes" and "safe spaces" and "trigger warnings," these universities have tried to restrict free thought, impose total conformity, and shut down the voices of great young Americans like those here today. These are great people.

All of that changes starting right now. We're dealing with billions and billions and billions of dollars. Taxpayer dollars should not subsidize anti-First Amendment institutions. And that's exactly what they are: anti-First Amendment. Universities that want taxpayer dollars should promote free speech, not silence free speech.

^{*} White House correction.

Today's groundbreaking action is the first in a series of steps we will take to defend students' rights. We are proudly joined by several young Americans who can speak directly about ideological intolerance on campus.

Here with us is Ellen Wittman, a junior at Miami University in Ohio, a great school. Ellen is the president of Students for Life. In 2017, Ellen planned an annual event to display small wooden crosses representing the lives of the unborn. School officials informed Ellen that she would be required to post signs all over campus providing a "trigger warning" to other students regarding her display.

Ellen, please come up. Say a few words. Tell us your story, please. Thank you.

Miami University student Ellen Wittman. Well, thank you, Mr. President. This is a truly historic day in our country's history. And I am so grateful that we have a President who recognizes that the First Amendment is under attack on our college campuses.

My story is so important, because I have seen lives saved through my Students for Life efforts on campus. But I never imagined the hostility I would face when trying to express my beliefs. It's ridiculous that it has gotten to this point.

Universities are supposed to be marketplaces of ideas. They should be encouraging free speech, not shutting it down. And speech is not free when university officials put conditions on student speech. The only permit we need to speak on campus is the First Amendment. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. You watch, we will be witnessing today some great future political leaders. There's plenty of them in the room. Not just up here, right? *[Laughter]* Out there too. We really appreciate it. That was beautiful. Thank you very much.

We're also joined by Kaitlyn Mullen, a student at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. While simply standing at a table to represent a conservative group on campus, Turning Point USA—which does such incredible work. And thank you very much, Charlie. That's true. Come on. We can give him a hand. Thank you.

Kaitlyn was approached by staff and a graduate instructor and was berated and cursed at. School officials tried to bully Kaitlyn into leaving, but she bravely stood her ground. Kaitlyn, please come up and say a few words. Okay, Kaitlyn? Thank you, darling. Thank you.

University of Nebraska–Lincoln student Kaitlyn Mullen. Thank you, Mr. President. What happened to me is common on universities today and students are getting shut down and silenced on campus. So I'm really thankful that President Trump is addressing this issue because, as the future of America, it's important that our universities are a place where we could speak freely and have healthy, respectful dialogue on campus.

So thank you so much, President Trump, for doing this. And no other student should have to go through what I've gone through on campus. So thank you.

The President. Thank you very much, Kaitlyn. Thank you. Thank you, Kaitlyn. Beautiful.

And I have to say that, you know, we have—in my opinion, we have more than they have. *[Laughter]* People don't realize that. You see what's going on.

I just came back from Ohio. The streets were lined with people. I came back recently from Alabama, where they had that horrible tornado. It was terrible. But the people were lined

as far as the eye could see—lined up with people. And we're here. This is the White House. I'm the President. And we're together.

And hopefully, we can bring everybody together. That's really what we want to do. And they can have different views. And if they do have different views, we encourage that. But they have to let you speak. They have to let you speak.

Also here with us today is Polly Olsen, a student at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College. Last year, Polly was handing out homemade Valentine's Day cards with messages such as "You are special" and "Jesus loves you."

College officials stopped her and told her that she would be restricted to so-called "free speech zone," because some people might find her cards offensive. I don't. [Laughter] I love that card. In fact, Polly, give me some. I'll send them around to my friends. [Laughter]

Polly, please say a few words. Polly. Polly, thank you.

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College student Polly Olsen. So freedom of speech is near and dear to my heart. My mother told me while she was homeschooling me that I would need to know what my First Amendment rights were, because someday they would be violated and I would have to stand up for them.

So I'm carrying on her legacy of handing out these little valentines encouraging people to know that they are loved and cared for. And within 15 minutes of setting foot on my campus this past year, I was told that I was soliciting and disrupting the learning environment and that it would not be tolerated and that I would have to stop handing out my valentines.

And I contacted some friends of mine and they sent me to WILL to have legal counsel because this wasn't the first time the school had done it to me. They had stopped me a year—well, a few months after my mom died—and told me that I was not allowed to do it then. So I went through months of trying to get them to change this policy that they were enforcing, and they told me that they would do it. Well, that was 5 years ago.

So now it was time to take action and make them follow through with what they were telling me that they were going to do—trying to shut me up. I'm just one of many students that are out there that universities and schools are trying to shut down, sweep it under the rug, and make them be quiet.

And I told them I'm not going to be quiet this time. I'm going to talk to anyone and everyone I can about our freedom of speech in this country, because it's really the core of America's freedom. And without freedom of speech, we don't have America anymore.

And so I challenge America to learn to love one another as Christ did on the cross for each one of us. And that—speak your differences. It's okay. We are in a country of freedom. And really, that's what's important, is to embrace the diversity that we have here, because that's made America great in the first place.

And we need to carry on that legacy of protecting freedom of speech on campuses and in our workplaces. People at work should not be afraid to express their beliefs. It's our right. It's our freedom. Thank you.

The President. So thank you all for your courage.

Today we are delivering a clear message to the professors and power structures trying to suppress dissent and keep young Americans—and all Americans, not just young Americans like

Ellen and Kaitlyn and Polly—from challenging rigid, far-left ideology. People who are confident in their beliefs do not censor others—we don't want to censor others—they welcome free, fair and open debate. And that's what we're demanding.

Under the policy I am announcing today, Federal agencies will use their authority under various grant-making programs to ensure that public universities protect, cherish—protect the First Amendment and First Amendment rights of their students or risk losing billions and billions of dollars of Federal taxpayer dollars.

Every year, the Federal Government provides educational institutions with more than \$35 billion in research funding. All of that money is now at stake. That's a lot of money. *[Laughter]* They are going to not have to like your views a lot, right? *[Laughter]*

We will not stand idly by and allow public institutions to violate their students' constitutional rights. If a college or university doesn't allow you to speak, we will not give them money. It's very simple.

At the same time, private universities should be held to their own policies on free speech. So, from now on, Federal agencies will also use their grant-making authority to promote transparency for students at private schools. These colleges should not be able to promise free speech in theory and then impose restrictive speech codes in practice, which is what many of them do.

Today's action is just the beginning of our efforts to protect free speech and advance our students' rights agenda. What I've been witnessing over the last long period of time, long before I became President, what I've been witnessing is outrageous.

This order will also empower students with vital information about the value of the programs they take on and—having to do with debt. Student loan debt. I'm going to work to fix it, because it's outrageous what's happening. You're not given that fair start. You're too far down. It's not right. And we're going to work very, very hard to get it fixed.

But we're going to start with 43 million people in the United States are currently working to pay off student loans. And we'll be talking about that very soon. We're going to work on that very soon. I've always been very good with loans and—*[laughter]*. I love loans. *[Laughter]* I love other people's money. *[Laughter]* And we're going to work on it. I made a lot of money with those loans, and you're going to too. You're going to do something that's going to be fair and good. But we're going to work with you very closely.

The average student loan borrower owes roughly \$35,000 dollars—that's a lot—and, in many cases, much more than that. I've seen numbers that go over \$200,000. You're behind the eight ball before you start.

And yet, typically, students who take loans do not have access to critical information about what career outcomes they can expect from their programs, majors, or fields of study. They borrow more money than they can ever expect to pay off or pay back.

Many middle class American families are getting ripped off, while tax-exempt colleges and large institutions, frankly—they take these tremendous endowments. You look at the money that they have. They're making a fortune.

For that reason, I am directing the Department of Education and the Department of the Treasury to publish detailed information on future earnings and loan repayment rates for every major and every program at every single school. It's very important.

Today's order also directs the Department of Education to propose a plan that will require colleges and universities to have skin in the game by sharing a portion of the financial risk of the student loan debt. I believe that colleges and universities, their costs have gone up more than anything I can think of. I've watched this. And you watch companies, and they'll keep it the same for years and years. And you watch these colleges and universities and certain institutions, where it just goes right through the roof.

And the reason: There's no incentive to them to watch costs. You see people at the heads of the institutions being paid a fortune. They don't care, because the Government loans the student the money, they pay the money to the college, and then the student graduates from college—maybe a very good college, but they graduate—or university—and they're stuck with \$200,000 in loans that they won't be able to pay off for a long time.

So we're going to make them have an incentive to keep their costs down. Right now they have no incentive whatsoever. I watched this over a period of time; I figured it out very, very quickly. I'm good at that stuff, believe me. *[Laughter]* And I just see their numbers go up so rapidly, because they just don't have the burden on them. And we're going to put burden on the institutions.

We want them to get the best teachers and the professors and the administrators and the heads, but the numbers are out of reality. And certainly, they make it out of reality for students when you have to pay back those loans someday. With today's action and every action to come, the Trump administration will fight for America's students. We're fighting very hard.

And remember what I said: We're going to give the student loans—where you have way, way over a trillion dollars in student loans—we're going to start looking at that very seriously and help some of those students that are just mired in debt.

We know that freedom must prevail on college campuses if freedom is to prosper in America. It's so important. And we believe that greatness must be practiced in our halls of learning if greatness is to thrive in our halls of government and our corridors of commerce.

You're going to have great lives. But I want you to get off to a great start, not a start where you're behind a barricade that just doesn't let you succeed. And we're going to make it much easier for you—this administration—and we've worked very hard on it already.

We'll be having some meetings. And we'll be having some very major discussions with some of the biggest colleges and universities. And we're going to have them shoulder some of the responsibility and some of the money that's necessary for you to use in order to get your education.

To every student and young American here today: Don't let anyone stop you from doing what you know is right, from asking questions, from challenging the powerful, or from speaking your mind. And that's the primary reason we're here right now. You're going to speak your mind. You're going to be fair. You're going to be reasonable. You're going to do it well. And you're going to speak your mind. *[Laughter]*

Never ever quit, never give in, and never back down. Keep standing up for your values, for your classmates, and for your country. And you can be certain that, every day of my Presidency, we will always support your rights and your freedoms and your future.

Thank you all for being here. This is a great honor for me. I've been watching this for too long. I've been watching things that are unwatchable, and I don't like it. But we're going to do

something about it. See? We like to act, as opposed to just watching and saying, "Oh, isn't that a shame?" [*Laughter*] We don't say that. We don't say that.

And I want to congratulate everybody—everybody—for being here. You have just a tremendous future ahead of you, and this will make it a lot easier. And you get that point of view across. And listen to the other point of view. Maybe you can change and maybe not. I doubt it. [*Laughter*] But maybe. You never know. And you what? If you can, that's okay. And you'll change them too. You're going to change them too. But ultimately, it brings people together.

So congratulations. I'll sign right now. Thank you all for being here.

[*At this point, the President signed the Executive order.*] Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:43 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Charlie Kirk, founder and executive director, Turning Point USA; Hayden Williams, director of campus strategy, Leadership Institute; and Courtney Lawton, former graduate teaching assistant in the English Department, University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Colleges and universities, free inquiry, transparency, and accountability, improvement efforts, signing the Executive order.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Azar, Alex M., II; DeVos, Elisabeth Prince; Kirk, Charlie; Lawton, Courtney; Mullen, Kaitlyn; Olsen, Polly; Whittman, Ellen; Williams, Hayden.

Subjects: Alabama : Tornadoes, damage and recovery efforts; Civil rights : Freedom of speech; Education : Postsecondary education :: Accountability and transparency, improvement efforts; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability and costs; Education : Postsecondary education :: Federal assistance; Education, Department of : Secretary; Health and Human Services, Department of : Secretary; Health and medical care : Abortion.

DCPD Number: DCPD201900164.