

Event 1: Colloquium: A European refugee crisis or a humanity crisis? (Notes)

With the recent uptick in refugee crises in the Middle East, we wanted to understand how the global community was dealing with the issue. The big tension point comes in play in Europe where nationalist sentiment is burgeoning anti-refugee policy and rhetoric. This mirrors our own nationalist tension in this country. We wanted to attend to see how people dealt with staunch political opposition and differing opinions on this issue.

The primary discussion in the talk revolved how to classify and deal with displaced migrants. An interesting question someone brought up was how to convince people in Europe that migrants were peaceful and good additions to their society. The main speaker explained that the best thing we can do as individuals is stand up for those marginalized in our society at each moment we can, in discussions and at the ballot box.

We interviewed a Hungarian girl that dealt with opposition from her friends and family in Hungary on her liberal immigration views. We also talked to an older male that told us about his experiences in Africa, another hot bed of migration. We asked them the following questions:

When talking to your friends and family, did you end up convincing them of your POV or did they convince you of their POVs?

Did your discussions on the topic of taking in refugees ever get heated and devolve into shouting matches?

After your trip back to Hungary, did your opinion change on displaced refugees from the discussions you had?

What was the major obstacle to engaging in educational discussions with people of opposing points of views?

How did people respond to migrants in their area? Were they receptive and supportive?

How did you respond to people that differed in opinion?

The biggest insight we garnered from our interviews was that people are more likely to dismiss opposing viewpoints when they can prescribe that opposition to some difference in character. Older people can dismiss opinions of younger people by saying "oh you're just young". In the case of our interviewee, her friends in Hungary discounted her opinions on immigration by saying "oh you're from Berkeley, so of course you think that way". We discovered that an effective way to get people to listen to each other more effectively might be to introduce as many similarities as possible in demographic and background, except for the for the opposing opinion at hand. The male who helped refugees in Africa explained how people of other countries like Sudan and Egypt were resistant to new migrants in their area. From this interview, we learned that a lot of resistance to new ideas and new culture comes from the fact that people feel threatened by differences.

Event 2: Free Speech on Campus: A Discussion with Dean Erwin Chemerinsky in Honor of Constitution Day (Notes)

Dean Erwin Chemerinsky of UC Berkeley's law school gave a speech on the importance of free speech, the various forms of free speech, and free speech in the context of the US Constitution. Specifically, he described what forms of speech was or was not protected by the US law.

I spoke to two individuals and asked them each the following interview questions:

What is your motivation for attending this event?

Were there any topics that you would have liked to learn about, but was not described?

Was there any topic that was omitted, or should have been discussed more? If so, what topic?

What were your thoughts on the event? What improvements could have been made?

What did you like about the event, and why?

I interviewed a UC Berkeley law major who intends to pursue a Master's Degree in Law and interviewed the event's AV Technician who is a left-wing liberalist. The UC Berkeley law student was aiming to go to UC Berkeley's graduate school of law, so she wanted to hear about what the Dean of the Law School had to say about the law and free speech. She said that she wished the Dean spoke more about ways to improve free speech rather than what the law currently says about free speech. She wanted more time to be dedicated to ways that the laws could enable greater free speech for students while creating a positive learning environment.

I then interviewed the event's AV Technician, who was recording the Dean's speech. She brought up the point that people actually did have diverse opinions (just like she does), but we do not learn about those opinions because they are never brought up, since people are afraid. Specifically, she mentions how the left-wing ANTIFA is not all bad, and actually has contributed towards good causes. She said that Milo Yiannopoulos wanted to put a poster of all students who were illegal immigrants, so that individuals can search for these people and perhaps deport them. However, the ANTIFA cared about the students and prevented the poster from being hung, which would have exposed several students. The AV Technician mentions that although the ANTIFA's methods may not be the most agreeable, they still performed a good deed that more people should recognize. She never mentioned this opinion to others out of fear of peer pressure to be against the ANTIFA, and that others would scorn at her if she expressed her opinion regarding the ANTIFA freely. She learned about the event via social media, and so I learned that social media was a great tool for spreading news or perspectives to various people.

We thereby discovered that people are afraid to express their diverse/true opinions, simply because they are too afraid. Having more laws set to protect people's views and free speech would definitely resolve the issue. Similarly, taking steps to transform our culture to being more tolerant of other sides' opinions despite disagreement is another important step in preventing fear of expressing opinions/views.