

Title: **Freedom of speech a cornerstone**  
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# Freedom of speech a cornerstone

Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute recently participated in a forum at my school, Lindenwood University in St. Charles. He appeared along with Cornell University economist Robert Frank.

The topic was culture and opportunity in America. Even if you've never heard of them or my school, the fact that this event went off without a hitch should be of interest to you.

One reason is because Charles Murray is best known as the co-author of *The Bell Curve*. Written in 1994, the *Bell Curve* explored the taboo subject of whether intellectual ability and class structure are related.

From the outset, Murray and his co-author, Richard Herrnstein of Harvard, were denounced for finding, as, Nobel Laureate James Heckman put it, "that differences in ability existed" and that such differences "predicted socioeconomic outcomes."

Because of his research, Murray has, inappropriately in many scholars' opinions, been labeled a racist, eugenicist, and misogynist.

He also has been banned from appearing or shouted down in similar events at other college campuses. The recent uproar at Middlebury College is the most dramatic.



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The fact that Murray's appearance at Lindenwood did not create a similar furor should give you hope that freedom of speech, a cornerstone of our democratic society, is alive and well.

While some high-profile universities have become bastions of "right-minded" thinking, there are far more institutions in which diverse and even controversial ideas are still debated as a part of normal academic discourse.

Only by confronting ideas that differ from our preconceived notions can understanding important societal issues move forward.

The other reason why this event is of general interest is because Frank, a liberal economist, and Murray, a libertarian political scientist, both agreed that the current system of income redistribution in the United States is a failure. Even worse, it is helping to polarize society.

Frank, whose most recent book is *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy*, argues that we often measure success relative to

our peers: if your neighbor adds on to her house, you may feel the urge to improve yours, too.

As a result, consumption too often takes a "Keeping up with the Joneses" mentality.

Frank argued that a major cause of this arms race in private spending is the current tax system. Instead of an income tax, he favors a consumption tax.

Consumption is based on your disposable—after tax—income. Frank's tax on spending, not income, alters your incentive to buy that larger house or fancier car simply to keep up appearances. His tax encourages saving, which promotes investment, faster economic growth, and prosperity.

Murray took a more direct route to the problem: provide every adult a guaranteed income. Though it may sound like a radical progressive idea from Bernie Sanders, it actually has a long history of support by conservative economists, like Milton Friedman.

The idea is that recipients, employed or not, receive an annual income from the government, enough to provide a basic standard of living. Those receiving the funds could spend it in whatever way they choose, and they could save it.

The trade-off is that other income transfer programs, such as Social Security, Medicare,

and agricultural and corporate subsidies would be eliminated. A guaranteed income program would increase individual freedom and responsibility, and shrink an inefficient and bloated federal bureaucracy.

Frank and Murray both agreed that the other's proposal has merits. They also agreed that neither proposal will see the light of day in our increasingly fractured societal and political landscape.

But more important is the fact that each scholar made his case without shouts of protest from the audience.

Freedom of ideas, the freedom to push against orthodoxy, however painful and distasteful some may find it, is our only hope for improving the lives and fortunes of everyone in society. Be glad to know that it still exists in some institutions of higher learning.

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