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We must neither short-circuit the truth nor silence ideas
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Recently, the faculty of The Evergreen State College voted on a resolution expressing their grave concern that academic freedom is increasingly under attack in the United States.

Most people understand the importance to our democracy of freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion and many of the other fundamental rights guaranteed by our Constitution.

But many people are less sure about what "academic freedom" means or why it is fundamentally important to our society.

Most people hear about academic freedom only occasionally and often in the most unusual cases, such as the recent controversy over statements made by University of Colorado professor Ward Churchill shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Nevertheless, the U.S. Supreme Court recognized the fundamental importance of academic freedom almost 50 years ago in *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*: "Teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding; otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die."

Academic freedom is based on the acknowledgement that if colleges and universities are to fulfill their role in society, students and faculty must be free to pursue their study and research wherever it might lead.

The intellectual history of higher education is full of ideas that, at first, seemed surprising and even offensive but later became widely held truths. History is also full of ideas that at first seemed exciting and full of promise but later proved to be mere fads and intellectual dead ends.

It is impossible to know in advance which ideas will lead to important breakthroughs and which will prove to be misguided.

The free and vigorous pursuit of these ideas will sort out the good ideas from the bad. The scientific and intellectual breakthroughs that result from such exploration make the whole process worthwhile for us all.

The process requires dialogue that is sometimes controversial and often uncomfortable.

Controversy and discomfort are not a sign that something is wrong. They are evidence that something is going right, that ideas are being challenged and tested in the search for truth.

It is a terrible mistake to react to this controversy by short-circuiting the pursuit of truth and silencing ideas that are unconventional, controversial or even offensive. It is especially important to keep this principle in view when political passions are high.

In 1949, following an investigation by our state Legislature, several University of Washington professors lost their jobs for expressing ideas that were allegedly un-American. A Pulitzer prize-winning newspaper investigation restored one of those faculty members to his job.

We are again at a time in our history when political passions run high and labeling people as heroes or villains has become commonplace. As Robert Frost wrote:

"... when at times the mob is swayed

"To carry praise or blame too far,

"We may choose something like a star

"To stay our minds on and be staid."

At such times, we must cultivate our ability to ask hard questions, to listen to unpopular ideas and to have a common dialogue about controversial topics. And it is especially important that we keep our eye on our "stars," our fundamental rights, one of which is academic freedom.

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