

The front page story (“President of UMass condemns racist e-mails”) in *The Boston Globe* of Tuesday, September 28th, demonstrates a lot of what’s wrong with the culture of higher education. Colleges and universities claim to be protective of free speech and academic freedom, but when push-comes-to-shove, campus administrators (and, sadly, a lot of students as well) lose all sense of what a liberal arts campus should be.

According to the *Globe* story, “University of Massachusetts President Martin Meehan on Monday condemned a threatening e-mail sent recently to a number of Black student groups at the Amherst flagship campus as administrators hired a cybersecurity firm to investigate the source of the anonymous message.” Later in the story, the *Globe* reports that “Steve Wessler, a specialist on hate crimes and conflict resolution, said the most important step the university can take is to provide space for students, and the rest of the campus community, to condemn the e-mails.”

And the story goes on: “In a statement posted on Facebook and Instagram, the UMass Black Student Union said it was ‘absolutely appalled’ by the anonymous e-mail but ‘certainly not surprised.’ The group criticized the university for not publicly responding sooner to racist incidents that had been reported on campus in recent weeks. ‘We are angry. We are hurt. We are tired,’ the group said.”

Nor was UMass Chancellor Kumble R. Subbaswamy hesitant to chime in about how such speech would be dealt with by the UMass administration. He referred to the authors of the anonymous e-mails as “contemptible,” an opinion that anyone can have and can voice, but then the chancellor went on to say: “I want to assure you that we ... will spare no measure in our investigation to determine the perpetrator(s) of these incidents.” And then Subbaswamy went on to articulate a specific plan for dealing with the incident – the kind of program that is increasingly common these days in colleges and universities. Subbaswamy announced the details of the university’s response. He said that the university will implement “a series of educational opportunities and action steps to promote understanding and an ongoing commitment to justice, equity, diversity and inclusion.” He said that these “action steps” would include, according to the *Globe*’s reporting, “a forum on ‘Black Joy, Black Healing and Black Justice’ hosted by the Office of Equity and Inclusion..., an increase in funding for the university’s Center for Racial Justice, and the creation of a Black Advisory Council.”

A reader searches this nearly half-page story (beginning on the front page) for any reference to free speech or academic freedom. UMass, a governmental institution, is under an obligation even more profound than the obligation of any private college or university to protect free speech, since the First Amendment covers governmental actions rather than actions by private parties and private institutions such as universities.

Thus, despite this public university’s enhanced obligation to protect free speech, we see a massive campus-wide mobilization, led by the UMass administration itself, to find the source of, and to punish, speech that is highly unpopular (sufficiently unpopular so that those who uttered it chose, in this case, to remain anonymous). The pile-on appears to be growing and has a distinctively “holier-than-thou” aspect, a communal exercise in self-piety. And in all of this brouhaha, there is not one mention, at least in the *Globe*’s story, of free speech and academic freedom. The UMass incident is, unfortunately, a demonstration of the tenor of our times – an example of what the late and great First Amendment advocate Nat Hentoff dubbed “free speech for me but not for thee.”

So what, one asks, is the solution for the modern university’s failure to protect academic freedom and free speech? One obvious recommendation: In addition to multiple deans designated to promote “equity and inclusion,” how about at least one dean to protect academic freedom?