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My Right to Learn

Marcy Cockrell, Marine Biology '08

As a student living in a rapidly changing world full of new, exciting, creative, and often controversial ideas, I look to my university—to administration, faculty, and fellow classmates—as a source of inspiration and as an outlet to express my own ideas and creativity. In expressing my thoughts and opinions, I have grown to rely on the practice of civil discourse, that is, the free flow and exchange of diverse ideas and opinions in a respectful setting conducive to intellectual discussion, interpretation, and change. After a year of studying at Roger Williams University, where a free exchange of ideas is one of the university's hallmarks, I understand all the more why civil discourse is an essential element in any education.

Recently, while attending the university's Civil Discourse Distinguished Lecture Series, I listened to the highly revered, outspoken author Salman Rushdie discuss the topics of censorship, democracy, and civil discourse. Stitching each issue together, Rushdie made the point that censorship of specific authors, books, and other publications is the first step in destroying creativity and a free society. Rushdie noted that the United States' Patriot Act, which grants the American government newly acquired powers, limits free expression as well as the sharing of thoughts, values, and cultures from minds around the world. Rushdie went on further to say that in a democracy where free speech is permitted, people are bound to become insulted simply because others have different opinions and ideas. Yet open discourse, Rushdie said, is essential to a free society.

America is viewed as a free society. At the very least, American citizens believe that America is a free society. But how can a society truly say it is free when the basic rights of its people are being violated? How can a free society come about when "insulting" ideas are not allowed? When civil discourse and a free exchange of ideas are not permitted? When censorship sometimes becomes too much? These very questions surround the Patriot Act and its various provisions. In a country whose people cherish free speech, civil discourse, and the exchange of ideas, the Patriot Act limits, and in some cases halts, the production of all three.

As an American—an American who values her First Amendment guarantee to freedom of speech—I firmly believe that the Patriot Act has serious implications for my country. More specifically, I believe that the Patriot Act has serious implications for students and the academic community.

Not all aspects of the Patriot Act limit the freedoms of the American people. The section that garners the most debate and concern is Section 215, providing the government with the power to access private records from banks and other financial institutions, schools, universities, libraries, and bookstores. The government has the power to do this without prior consent, without a warrant, and with the authority to prosecute any record holder who reveals that records have been turned over (Herman). As a result, Section 215 limits the ability of people to access certain information, thus hindering creative and learning processes.

Not only because I am an American, but also because I'm a student, the Patriot Act has struck me as intrusive and in violation of basic, personal freedoms. Freedoms guaranteed to every citizen by the American Constitution—freedom of speech and the right to justified search and seizure—are being violated under the Patriot Act. Freedom to express myself and my freedom to learn have been cut short. While the government won't be knocking on my door if I make a comment in a classroom setting, what if I were to publish a paper? Hypothetically, if I were to publish a paper on a topic considered "suspicious" by the government, and then, if having looked at the paper online or in a library, another student were to reference the paper for research or even read it for pleasure, the government could target that student for engaging in suspicious activities. In this case, not only does the Patriot Act violate freedom of speech—the right to write on whatever topic I choose—but it also violates the freedom to learn. The freedom to learn becomes an issue for several reasons. One, under Section 215 of the Patriot Act, a student could be deemed criminal for reading my "controversial" research. Two, in order to do the original research and avoid prosecution, I would have to use references considered to be "trustworthy" and "unsuspicious." Three, there is a possibility that the original sources I would need to write my paper could have already been prohibited for use, and what knowledge I could have gained from my research would be lost. In other words, having access to personal library records, the government could question, and even detain any student simply for trying to learn. If books and other media are thought to be connected with terrorism, yet the government does not release a list of such material or inform

individuals that they are under suspicion, can students truly feel free to learn, even at a university? Is a free flow of ideas truly possible in a place where only certain ideas are allowed? Is freedom of speech even relevant in a society where expression of certain thoughts or viewpoints is prohibited?

There are a number of organizations also asking these questions. For instance, the American Library Association states, "Intellectual Freedom is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored. Intellectual freedom encompasses the freedom to hold, receive and disseminate ideas." If intellectual freedom is restricted, then it follows that the freedom to be intellectual is impossible. This idea is further supported by the actions of organizations such as PEN America, an association of writers who work to actively defend free expression. PEN America firmly denounces the Patriot Act and its inherent ability to strip away freedom of expression. According to the PEN America Core Freedoms Campaign Statement, "Aspects of post-9/11 security measures, and the ways these measures have been applied, threaten free expression, harm democracy, and put us on the wrong side of international laws we have long promoted." As Rushdie said, a truly free society cannot be formed in the absence of free expression. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has also taken action against the Patriot Act and its various provisions. In attempts to "vindicate the public's right to information about government activity, the ACLU and other public interest organizations filed two requests under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) seeking records relating to the Justice Department's implementation and use of the USA Patriot Act" (FOIA). The ACLU views the Patriot Act as a threat to "the very rights and freedoms that we are struggling to protect" (USA). Known for activism of all kinds, the ACLU supports the basic rights of all Americans and fights to protect anyone whose rights are threatened.

The concerns Rushdie voiced in his lecture should speak to every student and faculty member at Roger Williams University. Restricted ideas and stifled creativity are in total opposition to what is desired at any university. In fact, they are in complete opposition to what is desired by students. As a student, I need access to various sources of information, to different viewpoints, to opposing opinions and ways of life. Access to information in all media forms, spanning all topics is the only way that a student can learn and grow into a learned scholar and person of the world. Bridging the world—connecting all people—requires a readily accessible database of information and unrestricted access to the ideas and opinions of others, no matter how controversial or dangerous those ideas and opinions may seem.

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