

## **Anonymous Free Speech: Yik Yak, Secret Societies, and Anonymous Newsletters**

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“If we were shielded from the consequences of our actions, how would that change the way we act?” -Plato

Students often feel invincible as though nothing can touch them. They may choose to use a veil of anonymity to say what they want when they want. By using methods such as anonymous newsletters, secret societies, or social media platforms, students may feel as though no one can hold them accountable. As student affairs professionals, this often frustrates us because of the impact it can have on both the individual making the statements and the individuals who are the target of such statements. However, it is possible to support the development of students in respectfully voicing their opinions, despite the existence of these anonymous methods.

At the University of Nevada, Reno there is a long history of secret societies and anonymous newsletters. One such secret society has persisted since 1916, and was originally formed to “better the university.” Instead of enacting positive change on campus, they write newsletters filled with homophobic, sexist, and racist commentary on campus-based and local events. They attend large campus events in masks and suits to hand out their newsletters and social media information. Groups like this have not always hidden behind the mask of anonymity, but often turn to it so they can continue their actions without being held accountable. In 2012, this organization incited harassment of a student, claiming she had reported her sorority for hazing her and her fellow new members until she withdrew from the university because of the mental anguish it caused. Although this is just one specific example, many college campuses struggle to deal with organizations oppressing free speech and progress through blatantly negative behaviors. For example, for many years, The Machine at the University of Alabama has rejected qualified candidates for positions like Student Government Chief of Staff, and threatened students and fraternity/sorority chapters with social purgatory if they dare cross them (Shepherd & Brown, 2015).

With changes in the level of tolerance for hate-speech nationwide, students, faculty, and administrators are challenging these groups more than ever before. The University of Nevada, Reno’s President, Marc Johnson, addressed the issue in his 2015 State of the University. He stated, “While we all value freedom of expression as a foundation of our society, I want to make clear that words and actions from [secret societies] that scare and denigrate women, members of the LGBT community, people of color, and anyone else to whom they feel superior do not, as they claim, ‘improve the university’ (Trent, 2015).” This is in addition to the student government senator formerly affiliated with the Machine at the University of Alabama who spoke out about the powerful group, and the students at Georgetown University who chose not to elect an individual as student government president because he was a member of a secret society (Smith, 2015; Shapira, 2013). These individuals have stepped out and challenged these groups, and even more should be encouraged to do so if they believe the groups are bringing harm to others or their university.

Campus-based anonymous organizations are not the only instigator of anonymous harassment and bullying on college campuses. Yik Yak, Yeti, and countless other social media platforms give individuals the opportunity to make statements and communicate ideas without others knowing who is responsible for them. Drug deals are made, parties are announced, hook ups are solicited, textbooks are sold, and politics are discussed all while under the veil of anonymity. As history has shown, these sort of things are to be expected by a company that hires students to hand out koozies, hold parties at bars, and repost questionable “yaks” on their other social media pages. These posts often incite intense arguments and bullying, which includes the targeting of certain student groups, administrators, and individual students. Many of our colleagues around the country have felt the impact directly, as they themselves have been made the target of anonymous social media posts criticizing their work with students, questioning their sexual preferences, or fueling rumors of inappropriate behavior, ultimately being attacked by the very individuals they work to support and seek to develop.

While we would like to believe students are the only people using these social media platforms to disseminate hateful speech, we also saw Yik Yak emerge as a problem for professionals during the 2015 annual conference of NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education). In fact, the situation got so out of hand NASPA had to issue a statement about the hateful posts being made and reminded everyone to behave and respect their colleagues (Thomason, 2015).

Free speech is one of our constitutional rights and should be protected as such. However, we must start having discussions regarding how anonymous bullying and harassment crosses the line from free speech to hate speech. We have all seen how Yik Yak and other anonymous platforms can tear down a person, a chapter, and a community. The damage secret societies and anonymous newsletters have on campuses and students is also well documented. These challenges raise such questions as: Is anonymous free speech protected? Are students free to say what they want on these platforms?

Though answering these questions may give practitioners an easier way to discuss the topic, it does not address the root of the problem: the feeling of invincibility. So how do we effect change with students who feel invincible? We challenge the ideas making them feel invincible and regularly push them outside of their comfort zone. Having real conversations on difficult topics, with both other students and professionals, will help them to better articulate their opinions and increase their efficacy in challenging issues in a healthy and productive way. We need to help challenge the ideas they have without stifling their desire to be socially and politically active. Students should be proud to stand up and present their opinions and beliefs, but the validity and value of their beliefs often disappear when they do it anonymously. It is the role of a student affairs practitioner to help them realize that.

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