

Fact check on Free Enterprise Club

FACT: The Free Enterprise “Club” is a non-profit, political organization with a political agenda which utilizes what have now become standard political techniques of making brash, attention-getting statements and accusations in a well-orchestrated campaign to secure more social media engagement, more media hits and more donations. Unfortunately, the Free Enterprise Club is using public universities as the means of doing so.

Below is a section-by-section review of an email recently distributed by The Free Enterprise Club about ASU:

FREE ENTERPRISE CLUB: “Universities are supposed to be the “marketplace of ideas.” With a “green light” rating from the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), you would think that Arizona State University (ASU) would understand this.”

— FACT: TRUE. ASU has a green light rating from FIRE. And ASU does understand the university to be a marketplace of ideas. <https://eoss.asu.edu/resources/free-speech>

FEC: “But apparently, the school would rather be just another woke university that shuts down free speech.”

— FACT: FALSE. <https://www.asu.edu/about>

FEC: “Now, the T.W. Lewis Center for Personal Development — a center of the Barrett Honors College — and its executive director Ann Atkinson have found out the hard way. Back in February, Atkinson organized an event on “Health, Wealth, and Happiness” as part of a series from the Lewis Center focused on connecting students with professionals who can offer career and life advice. Speakers for the event included Rich Dad, Poor Dad author Robert Kiyosaki, radio talk show host and founder of Prager U Dennis Prager, founder and president of Turning Point USA Charlie Kirk, and heart-transplant cardiologist Radha Gopalan.”

— FACT: The event described above took place at ASU. In the words of the Free Enterprise Club: “... the event proved to be a great success with 1,500 attendees in person, more than 24,000 attendees online, and zero disturbances...”

FEC: “For a university that offers classes on subjects like witchcraft and critical theories of sexuality, this event felt pretty tame by comparison.”

— FACT: ASU offers more than 10,000 individual courses taught by nearly 6,000 faculty addressing all aspects of human history, thought and behavior, taught by faculty of varying viewpoints and backgrounds. That includes courses on the history and philosophy of religion as well as human sexuality.

FEC: “But the mere mention of these conservative speakers caused more than 75 percent of the Barrett Honors College faculty to have a meltdown ... Along with sending a letter to Barrett Honors College Dean Tara Williams condemning the event and calling the speakers “purveyors of hate,” some faculty spent time in class denouncing it while others actually recruited students to oppose the program.”

— FACT: Some ASU faculty members disagreed with the college hosting an event that was not organized and sponsored by ASU faculty or students. <https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/2023/06/25/asu-faces-threats-democratic-debate-not-from-faculty/70347432007/> ASU is not aware that any class time was used by faculty to oppose the event or that students were “recruited” by faculty to oppose it. To the contrary, Barrett sent messages to the faculty explicitly stating that they could not encourage students to skip the event.

Fact check on Free Enterprise Club (continued)

FEC: “Looks like ASU’s commitment to force job applicants to sign diversity statements is paying off.”

— FACT: FALSE. ASU employees are not forced to sign diversity statements. They are, however, required to sign a pledge to uphold the U.S. Constitution. This is required by statute for state employees. <https://public.azregents.edu/Policy%20Manual/6-701-Loyalty%20Oath.pdf>

FEC: “On top of that, on-campus marketing of the event was removed with fliers torn down and all digital advertising scrubbed. Atkinson was also told by the dean that she couldn’t send an email promoting the event all while ASU continued to promote a counter-event.”

— FACT: FALSE. The event, like any individual Barrett event, was publicized through the Honors Digest, an email newsletter that goes out every weekday to all Barrett students. Barrett advertised the event in the Honors Digest, and on the TV screens throughout the Barrett buildings, and through posted flyers, for multiple days. Barrett also supported paid digital advertising for the event. If anyone removed fliers, it was not at the direction of ASU or Barrett leadership. The event, actually, is STILL listed on the ASU Events page: <https://asuevents.asu.edu/event/lewis-center-presents-health-wealth-happiness>

FEC: “And she was warned that if the speakers made any political statements, it wouldn’t be in the “best interests” of the Lewis Center.”

— FACT: FALSE. Speakers may certainly make political statements while speaking on an ASU campus, and the speakers at the Lewis Center event were neither the first nor last to do so. ASU employees are also free to make political statements and be politically active on their own time. They are, however, cautioned about the need to comply with the state statute prohibiting the use of ASU resources to engage in political activity: <https://ogc.asu.edu/political-activity>

FEC: “Atkinson ignored all the threats. . .”

— FACT: FALSE. There were no threats. Disagreement, yes. Opposing voices, yes. But that’s the desired outcome from building an academic community of 100,000 people in which free speech for all is honored and respected.

FEC “. . . and the event proved to be a great success with 1,500 attendees in person, more than 24,000 attendees online, and zero disturbances ...”

— FACT: TRUE. As the Free Enterprise Club acknowledges, the event about which it is complaining was not cancelled, was a great success and all the speakers identified by the Free Enterprise Club spoke. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7ZuHms7HaM>

FEC: “So, how did ASU respond to this success? Lin Blake, the event operations manager at ASU Gammage Theater (where the event was held), was fired despite initially being labeled a “rockstar” for how she handled the event. And as of June 30, ASU dismantled the Lewis Center and terminated Atkinson’s position.”

— FACT: The employee identified by the Free Enterprise Club left ASU employment for reasons having nothing to do with the Lewis Center event. If the former employee agrees, ASU will be glad to provide additional information.

FEC: “Of course, this isn’t the first time ASU has shown disdain for conservative events.”

— FACT: FALSE. ASU has not shown disdain for conservative events. Such events have been hosted both by ASU departments such as ASU’s School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership (<https://scetl.asu.edu/>), the Center for Political Thought and Leadership, the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies, and by ASU’s numerous and varied student organizations. In recent years, the following “conservative” speakers have appeared at ASU: Conservative lawyer John Eastman, Ashton Blaise Whitty and Tim Gionet (aka, Baked Alaska), Jared Taylor, anti-Islam speaker Carl Goldberg, former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, and Charlie Kirk, in a previous appearance.

Fact check on Free Enterprise Club (continued)

FEC: “In January 2022, the university offered conflicting explanations for canceling a fundraiser that was set to feature Arizona Congressman Andy Biggs and former Utah Congressman Jason Chaffetz.”

— FACT: Congressman Biggs not only knows he is welcome to speak at ASU anytime, but has also spoken on campus several times in just the last few years alone.

FEC: “And in March 2022, the school initially canceled two other conservative events that included speakers Bret Weinstein and Katie Pavlich. The March events were eventually restored with a follow-up email that stated, “Under the leadership of President Michael Crow, Arizona State University is committed to intellectual diversity.”

— FACT: Mr. Weinstein and Ms. Pavlich spoke at ASU without any difficulties or disruptions.

<https://asuevents.asu.edu/event/katie-pavlich-guest-lecture>

FEC: “For President Crow and ASU, it now appears that “intellectual diversity” and free speech are simply limited to allowing speakers to speak. But if those speakers even dare to hold ideas that are counter to the prevailing orthodoxy on campus, there will be retribution. Positions will be terminated. Centers will be closed. And students will suffer because of it.”

— FACT: Honoring free speech does mean allowing speakers to speak. It also means allowing listeners to listen and protestors to protest. <https://eoss.asu.edu/resources/free-speech>

At ASU, no ASU centers have been closed or ASU personnel fired as a result of any speaker appearing on campus. The donor for whom the Lewis Center was named withdrew his gift. Barrett will continue the Lewis Center’s activities as part of regular college academic programming, but with the withdrawal of donor funding, will no longer maintain an investment of more than \$300,000 per year in salary and benefits costs for an executive director to run programs that can be maintained by other staff. What conveniently isn’t reported: All of the faculty associated with the Lewis center remain in Barrett.

FEC: “After all, many undergraduates skipped out on the “Health, Wealth, and Happiness” event because they worried that their attendance could hurt them academically.”

— FACT: Neither ASU nor its faculty track or monitor the personal or political activities of students. As all parents know, it’s hard enough to keep track of what everyone in your family is doing; it would simply be impossible to do so for our 80,000 students on our numerous campuses. And among our community of students, their beliefs and values are their own. Given the large number of in-person and online attendees at the event, we expect many were students, and we hope they found the event thought-provoking.

FEC: “And it should inspire lawmakers to find ways to ensure that free speech is protected at our state’s taxpayer-funded universities.”

— FACT: They already have. Learn more about state laws and ABOR policy regarding free speech:

<https://www.azregents.edu/board-committees/arizona-board-of-regents-committee-on-free-expression>