

**Subject:** Philadelphia Inquirer: "Why I agreed to debate conservative podcaster Steven Crowder--and why it didn't happen"

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**From:** jlzimm@aol.com

**To:** JONATHAN ZIMMERMAN

## PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

### Why I agreed to debate conservative podcaster Steven Crowder--and why it didn't happen

Jonathan Zimmerman  
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Steven Crowder is a right-wing political podcaster. He [spread conspiracy theories](#) about the 2020 election, falsely suggesting it was stolen. He has mocked [gay](#) and [trans](#) people. And he [called](#) a television reporter “aggressively Asian,” contrasting her to the “Americanized Asians” more commonly seen on TV.

So why did I agree to debate him at Penn Friday?

The first reason is that I’m an educator, and I think we need to speak across our differences in order to learn from each other. That’s also why [I agreed to be a podcast guest of Joe Rogan](#), who has said some [pretty terrible things](#) himself.

The second reason is that I’m a Democrat, and I didn’t want to validate conservatives’ much-repeated claim that the liberal academy is afraid to talk to them.

But now Penn has confirmed it, by effectively shutting down my debate with Crowder. And that makes me wonder if we want debate at all.

We liberals talk a good game about that, of course, proclaiming our commitment to [“challenging discussions”](#) and [“difficult conversations.”](#) But when a conversation might become truly challenging — or difficult — we run the other way.

Penn’s [performing arts center](#) initially agreed to host Crowder last Friday and to [let him livestream our debate](#), which is his standard practice. If our discussion was taped and distributed later, he said, critics could claim that it had been edited to favor one side or disfavor another. That’s why he insists on livestreaming everything he does.

Then the university told him he couldn’t do that, and Crowder pulled out. Penn’s “open expression” [guidelines](#) state that “livestreaming an event is not permitted except in limited circumstances where reaching a wide audience is appropriate” and approved by university officials.

I thought it would be highly appropriate for our debate to reach a wide audience, instead of restricting it to Penn. And it would also be fully consistent with our duty to [educate for democracy](#), which is another goal that Penn [puts in bright lights](#).

No such luck. Livestreaming the event would pose a threat to [“safety.”](#) university officials said, because it might inspire a flash mob to descend on the university. It’s just as plausible that blocking the livestream would have done that, because the only way viewers could watch the debate would be to attend in person. We don’t know, which is precisely why we shouldn’t let the university determine who gets to speak and where.

And Penn is proposing even more limits on what we can say. A new [draft](#) of its guidelines would prohibit speech that “targets individuals or groups” on the basis of race, religion, sexual orientation, and more. So would “From the river to the sea, Palestine must be free” — which some Jews hear as a [call for genocide](#) against them — be banned?

That was a rallying cry of demonstrators at Penn and elsewhere after the Oct. 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza. Now nobody knows what is safe to say. No wonder there’s been [so little protest on our campuses](#) against the recent American and Israeli strikes on Iran, even after President [Donald Trump’s genocidal threat](#) to destroy a “whole civilization” there.

Part of that silence is due to Trump’s attacks on higher education, of course. His administration [arrested student demonstrators](#) and threatened universities with huge fines if they allowed [“illegal protests,”](#) whatever that means. But the universities are at fault, too, for their craven capitulations to him. That starts with their new speech restrictions, at Penn and on other [campuses around the country](#).

And censorship is the enemy of education, in all times and places. Steven Crowder and I could have learned from each other, and we could have taught the audience something as well. I received dozens of messages from students in the days before our scheduled debate, telling me how excited they were to see me go toe-to-toe with Crowder.

They’re disappointed now. And we taught them a different kind of lesson: that some speech is too dangerous for them to hear.

Meanwhile, we also gave Crowder another convenient weapon for owning the libs. As soon as Penn said he couldn’t livestream, he [went on the air](#) to tell his fans that the left-wing academy didn’t want to talk to conservatives.

“I’d like to hear a statement from Prof. Zimmerman,” one listener [wrote](#). “It’d be interesting to see if he’s willing to stand up to his school administration for free speech.”

So here is my statement: Penn is a storied institution, but it has lost the plot on open expression. And it is playing right into the hands of people like Crowder, who say we’re too scared to engage them.

I’ll be happy to debate Steven Crowder, anywhere he chooses. It won’t be at my own

university, but that will be Penn's loss. And you can be sure of one thing: It will be livestreamed. I hope you'll tune in.

*Jonathan Zimmerman teaches education and history at the [University of Pennsylvania](#). He is the author of "[Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools](#)."*