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## Know Your Rights. Loudly.

BY WES DODSON on SEPTEMBER 26, 2018 • ( 0 )



On Wednesday of last week, students from the UT campus gathered to listen to representatives from the Council on American-Islamic Relation (CAIR) and the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES) speak about First Amendment and individual rights in encounters with state actors. The event was a thorough and useful overview of a student's rights on and off campus. However, in a nation where rights literacy is abysmal, this event was even more important as a signal to state actors — a term which includes law enforcement *and* campus administrators — that our campus will not tolerate rights abuses. In that lecture room in RLP, students participated in knowing their rights loudly.

Americans are woefully ignorant of their rights. In 2017, of those that could identify a single First Amendment right, less than half correctly cited freedom of speech. A mere 15 percent knew that freedom of religion is enshrined in the First Amendment. As for freedom of the press, right to assembly, and right to petition, awareness was at a sobering 14 percent, 10 percent, and 3 percent, respectively. Two hundred and twenty-six years after the Bill of Rights was signed, 37 percent of American adults could not name a single right protected by the First Amendment.

Purely as an antidote to this ignorance, events like the Know Your Rights seminar are important because of the intrinsic value of their content. It is useful to know that campus administrators at a public university are considered state actors and cannot search your dorm on a whim. It is useful to know that you have the right



### Who We Are

*The Texas Orator* is a nonpartisan, peer-reviewed political publication that was founded and is maintained by University of Texas at Austin students. We value thorough analysis in our articles and strive to protect the ideals of free speech and unhindered access to information on campus and nationwide. We seek to keep the student body informed of the implications of ever-changing political climates, both domestically and abroad, from a range of voices and perspectives.

We have been indexed as scholarly literature by the [UT Libraries](#) and by [UT Undergraduate Studies](#).

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to record interactions with law enforcement. It is *very* useful to know that your roommate could potentially put you in jeopardy by giving state actors consent to search your room (if you haven't already, kindly ask your roommate to, you know, NOT DO THAT).

However, and perhaps more importantly, these kinds of events are valuable for the signal that they send to law enforcement and campus administrators. Public events that inform citizens about their First Amendment rights amount to more than the sum of their attendees. Communities coming together to inform members about their rights signal to state actors that abuses will not be tolerated. Individuals can know their rights; communities can know their rights loudly.

Ignorance enables abuse. The statist regimes of the 20th century knew this fact and crafted complex, broad legal codes accordingly. In Soviet-era Russia, political rivals were arrested by the NKVD, Russia's secret police, on the basis of vaguely defined crimes, such as "[counter-revolutionary activity](#)," and charged without trial. The People's Republic of China criminalizes the "[use \(of\) rumor, slander or other means to encourage subversion of the political power of the State or to overthrow the socialist system](#)." These laws were purposefully vague by authoritarian regimes and kept so by a lack of judicial clarification. In a system where laws are incomprehensible, ignorance cannot but obtain.

Americans, however, have no such excuse. The Bill of Rights explicitly declares many of our core rights and is available across nearly every media platform in existence. Doubt it? Enjoy your constitutional freedoms on a cold day wearing [this](#) constitution shawl and drinking out of [this](#) Bill of Rights mug, all while snuggled warmly [under the First Amendment](#).

Yet in 2017, [53 percent of Americans](#) think, incorrectly, that immigrants here without documentation have no rights under the First Amendment. At the Know Your Rights seminar, the speakers from CAIR and RAICES demonstrated not only the folly of this view, but also the danger. A community that does not know the rights of its most marginalized members is helpless to aid them in encounters with state actors. Again, ignorance enables abuse.

Both speakers recognized the changes in the American political and cultural climates that increasingly marginalized and "otherized" members of non-Christian and non-native groups. Being an ally to these communities means knowing not only your rights but the common rights of all in encounters with state actors. Representatives from the Nueces Mosque recognize the importance of rights literacy in this mission saying, "(w)e want our members to know their rights if they are ever in compromising positions and to also encourage our allies to be informed and speak up."

Knowing your rights is essential to the protection of yourself and marginalized members of the community in encounters with state actors. But it's also a defensive measure. It is important in the occurrence of a rights abuse, but it does not help to change the underlying culture in law enforcement that encourages those abuses. This is where knowing your rights loudly is crucial.

The NKVD and the Ministry of State Security (MSS), the Chinese secret police, were able to act with impunity precisely because there existed a state of general ignorance. When citizens have no idea about their avenues of legal recourse, arms of the state can abuse without fear. Ignorance doesn't just enable abuses, it encourages them. When state actors know that citizens are clueless, they become all the more cavalier.



Think analogs between the NKVD, the MSS, and ICE stretch the truth? Ana Maria Rea of RAICES holds up a blank warrant which she says ICE often uses to convince suspected undocumented immigrants that they have the authority to search the premises. Sometimes, ICE skips the nicety of even pretending to have a warrant, such as in the case of [Marcial de Leon Aguilar's warrantless arrest](#) at his job on a New York dairy farm.

Knowing your rights loudly, then, is one way of combating these abuses. Events like the Know Your Rights seminar are strong signals to state actors that marginalized communities on campus are serious about knowing their rights when interacting with law enforcement. This, in turn, helps to create a climate on campus where state actors are cognizant of the prevailing rights literacy and less likely to commit abuses.

Knowing your rights loudly means not keeping quiet when you see misconduct by state actors. Members of the Nueces Mosque community want you to listen when a member of your campus community needs help.

"We encourage standing up and speaking your mind when you see any injustice, to remind your Muslim friends about their rights if you ever witness any situation where they are being taken advantage of. Like our speaker from RAICES said, our allies can be the roommates that are sensitive of immigration statuses and not open the door for law enforcement, and to read the warrant and make sure that it's legit."

As a nation that cares about its most marginalized communities, we need to send louder signals to law enforcement that we are aware of our shared rights. As a campus with a vibrant community of [undocumented](#) or DACAmented students, we need to show campus administrators that we can be effective advocates for the rights of all students.

Events like the Know Your Rights seminar are important steps toward this goal. However, in order to create an environment of rights literacy on campus that discourages abuses of power, especially against the most powerless amongst us, we must further encourage these kinds of events. Students who have the privilege of citizenship are in a unique position to lend their voice to marginalized communities by participating in these kinds of events. We, as a campus, must show those who abuse the rights of our fellow students that not only do we know our rights, but that we will use that knowledge to advocate for those who can't advocate for themselves. In essence, we need to know our rights loudly.

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