

Speaker Power: The Andover Experience

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I'm a new 11th grader at Andover, so I've only been here for a few months. Yet in that short amount of time, I've engaged in countless conversations centered around a common, recurring question: *Just how privileged is Andover?*

I get the question mostly from friends and teachers back at my former high school, a public school in New Jersey. Often, the question is inspired from a bout of curiosity; an attempt to fathom life at one of the most prestigious boarding schools in America. For many at my former school, the image of boarding schools—specifically one like the renowned Andover—is of a privilege-dominated institution. Additionally, rather frequently, I've participated in a wide range of conversations about Andover's privilege with other people right here on campus, from faculty to peers. Yet after only spending a few months here, I feel like certain parts of Andover's privilege remain under-discussed on campus. I find it especially important to highlight these oversights because, as we students continue to grow and learn at Andover, it's critical that we evaluate and understand our privilege to be best aware of our environment.

After all, discussion about privilege at Andover often remains exclusively focused on the school's finances—and, in some respects, rightly so. After all, coming from a small high school, it's impossible for me to escape my amazement at Andover's \$1 billion endowment. The ability for student clubs and activities to consistently receive significant funding is incredible to me, especially as I reflect on the difficulties of funding I faced at my public school. And I've yet to even mention Andover's 500 acre campus, state of the art facilities, and largely-supportive faculty and staff. With that in mind, it does seem somewhat natural that Andover conversations about privilege tend to stick to the well-beaten path of discussing money.

Despite the nature of financial conversations, I feel like there is more to privilege at Andover than simply what's in the school's bank account. And, so far, I've noticed one that one particularly striking aspect of privilege at Andover remains under-discussed: guest speakers.

Never before in my life have I experienced as wide a range of speakers as I've seen presented here at Andover. During my time here, I've been exposed to an array of significant figures—most notably, talented people of color. Andover's inclusion of guest events represents a stark contrast to my former school, where the presence of prominent voices in society were few and far between. To be sure, I am not, by any means, expecting a public high school to meet and exceed the platform of Phillips Academy Andover. These schools exist in two vastly different environments and serve two vastly different purposes. But, arriving here after experiencing a public school devoid of guest voices to supplement learning experiences, I have entered Andover especially grateful for the opportunities presented by guest speakers.

Artists, scholars, and intellectuals like Elizabeth Acevedo, Sarah Kay, Khalil G. Muhammad, Eva Millona, Imani Perry, David Canton, and Marissa Harris-Perry represent only the beginning of the list of figures to appear and share at Andover so far this year. All but one a person of color, each of those names have inspired me, a young person of color, to better understand my identity and better improve my knowledge of the world. Simply put, those appearances were, for me, a breath of fresh air in the stuffy bubble Andover tends to exist. Through seeing guest appearances, I have been able to hear from perspectives outside my regular thought circle and have learned innumerable from such voices.

Yet, as I've reflected on the year of guest appearances, I've realized how the presence of various speakers on campus signal a crucial, yet somewhat subtle, aspect of Andover's privilege. In such a short period of time, I've become accustomed to impressive guests arriving at Andover—a reality that adds to this idea of speaker privilege. On this campus, we students are holding conversations with some of the most important figures in their respective fields, introducing crucial perspectives into our growing selves. Being exposed to voices like Melissa Harris-Perry and Khalil G. Muhammad, for example, can potentially be transformative in a student's development.

But that Andover reality is, often, not the reality for other high school students around the nation and the world. *Not every student our age has access to the speaker opportunities Andover students experience*, and that's a privilege that is extremely easy to overlook. It took me a while, myself, to even catch the privilege of our speaker selection at Andover. Reflecting on my two years in New Jersey high school, I can count on one hand the amount of guests we students were exposed to during the school day. At Andover, on the other hand, I've been fortunate enough to see a guest figure every couple of weeks. It's definitely a stark turnaround of school environments, but it is also scary: only a select few students have guest speaker opportunities like those presented at Andover. Not all high school students can learn from and experience—first hand—important voices in our society. Undoubtedly, the tangible, and intangible, benefits of those experiences holds enormous value in student development. It's extremely unfortunate, and upsetting, that not all can consistently engage in those experiences.

The speaker privilege at Andover also shows through negative student treatment of guests. Most recently, and notably, was during Harris-Perry's keynote all school speech on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. All throughout her brilliant and impactful presentation, a constant smattering of disruptive laughs, snickers, and comments echoed around the Chapel as she spoke. Harris-Perry, an accredited professor and television show host, was blatantly disrespected that morning, yet the vast knowledge she shared with Andover was immeasurable. Harris-Perry is an outstanding guest speaker for any school, let alone Andover, but that fact was overlooked when some students disrupted her presentation. Those people in the audience couldn't fully appreciate the importance of speaker Harris-Perry being at Andover, which highlights the privilege, and entitlement, that exists in the student body towards guest figures. That culture of privilege completely undermines any potential for personal growth through guest speakers. It also sheds some light on why

speaker privilege remains under discussed here: it is woven so inherently in the fabric of Andover that students begin to take speakers for granted.

I've only been here for a term and a half, but I've been fortunate to experience a rich range of guest personalities here at Andover. Reflecting on those interactions with speakers at Andover, though, forces me to reckon with the undeniable privilege this institution holds—and how I, as a student here, inherently benefit from that privilege. Sure, students and faculty openly discuss the high-ranking financial standing of Andover and how the monetary privilege of the school manifests itself daily. But, in my time here, the privilege of guest speakers is especially noticeable. Or, at least, it is to some.