
2021 | Faculty Conference Papers



Table of Contents

Introduction	2
<u>Beyond the Search for Truth: Why Critical Inquiry Will Win More Hearts and Minds for the Academic Freedom Cause</u> Amna Khalid & Jeffrey Aaron Snyder	4
<u>Self-Censorship or Just Being Nice? Understanding White College Students' Decisions About Classroom Speech</u> Elizabeth Niehaus	13
<u>Who's Afraid of Safe Spaces?</u> Jonathan Zimmerman	46
<u>On Building a Culture of Campus Free Expression</u> Daniel Cullen	70

Introduction

FIRE's 2020 Faculty Network Conference, like so many other things that year, was postponed as a result of the challenges and realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was regrettable for multiple reasons. For one, FIRE's Faculty Network Conference, in a few short years, had established itself as a hospitable and invigorating environment for debate and discussion, a place where professors got to meet numerous practitioners outside their disciplines and weren't afraid to venture controversial lines of argument. This isn't FIRE's own self-aggrandizing assessment — it's what we heard time and again from professors who attended, some of whom sought to return multiple times because they have relatively few opportunities for such experiences.

The other major reason to regret not bringing faculty together for our conference in 2020 was that, at that particular moment, there was a lot of need for frank, open discussion, and higher education needed all the spaces it could accommodate for people concerned for the state of free speech and academic freedom. On top of the special challenges to academic freedom posed by the conditions of the pandemic, political discourse in 2020 was dominated by issues of racial justice and social unrest that followed a series of high-profile killings by police, most notably of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Sensitivities around discussions of race and inequality on campus spiked, demands that universities punish speakers with "wrong" opinions on the issues skyrocketed, and FIRE witnessed its single busiest period, in terms of requests for assistance, in our history. One small academic conference wasn't about to solve those structural issues, but its absence was felt nonetheless.

Fortunately, the clouds parted enough in 2021 to allow us to follow through on our original plan to bring the FIRE Faculty Network Conference back to Chicago, where it was held in 2018. Our 2021 Faculty Network Conference was held from October 14-16, with sessions taking place at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business's Gleacher Center in downtown Chicago. To add an exclamation point to the conference's University of Chicago connection, the keynote

speech was delivered by University of Chicago Chancellor (and former president) Robert Zimmer, a leader on free expression almost without peer in the ranks of academic leaders.

As with all previous FIRE conferences, the papers presented at our 2021 Faculty Network Conference were selected through an open call for proposals issued by FIRE. This volume represents several of the papers presented in 2021. As is also the case with these volumes, authors are able to make edits to their papers after presenting them at our conference, in response to feedback received from conference panelists and attendees. Two papers presented at the 2021 FIRE Faculty Network Conference are not included in this volume for special reasons of their own. One, a paper on “Diversity Statements” from University of California, Davis School of Law professor Brian Soucek, represented a draft article that has since been published in the UC Davis Law Review.¹ The other, presented by Grand Canyon University doctoral student Anthony Rotolo, represented doctoral research that has since been defended and published.² Their work may not appear in our volume, but we are proud that our conference served as a waypoint for their scholarship.

A final word: The papers contained herein represent the scholarly and personal opinions of the authors, and not necessarily those of FIRE. And while the papers are bound together for the purposes of this volume, the work is in all other ways the sole property of the authors.

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November 2022

¹ Brian Soucek, *Diversity Statements*, 55 U.C. DAVIS L. REV 1989 (2022), <https://lawreview.law.ucdavis.edu/issues/55/4/articles/soucek.html>.

² Rotolo, Anthony. (2022). Cancel Culture in Academia: Social Media Self-presentation in the Context of Imagined Surveillance. 10.13140/RG.2.2.23584.87045.

Beyond the Search for Truth: Why Critical Inquiry Will Win More Hearts and Minds for the Academic Freedom Cause

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October 2021

The emergence of organizations committed to free speech, academic freedom, and viewpoint diversity over the last few years has been heartening. From calls to reorient universities around social justice to legislation dictating what can and can't be taught, threats to academic freedom from the left and the right alike have proliferated of late. Indeed, the need to define and protect the mission of the university is palpable. But this begs the question: what is that mission?

The newest of these organizations is the Academic Freedom Alliance (AFA). The [aim](#) of AFA is to protect “freedom of thought, inquiry, expression and discussion” so that scholars are able to “fulfill their vocation as truth-seekers” and colleges and universities can be “faithful to their mission as truth-seeking institutions.” The home page for AFA has a banner that boldly states “Solidarity in Pursuit of Truth.”

Heterodox Academy, which was founded in 2015, doesn't expressly reference truth in its mission statement but truth-seeking is nonetheless central to its scope of work. Founding member Jonathan Haidt has delivered a series of [seminal talks](#) making the case for why truth, and not social justice, should be the telos of the university. HxA's [key explainer video](#) on the purpose of the university similarly emphasizes the search for truth. Here are three excerpts:

Jonathan Haidt: “What I'm hoping is that in 10 or 15 years students will understand that they are stepping into a gate into a world that is different from the world just outside

the gate...This is a different place. This is a place where we are engaged collectively with each other to find the truth.”

Robert George: “Unless we have the freedom to express our ideas and debate...unless people are willing to talk to each other...unless people are willing to listen to each other, we cannot prosecute our goal of truth seeking, the very mission of a college or university. And the question of ideas is necessary for the project of truth seeking, even when the ideas being questioned are our deepest, most cherished, even identity forming ideas and beliefs.”

FIRE too, while not expressly mentioning truth seeking in its mission statement, articulates the value of free speech by invoking Mill’s marketplace of ideas approach as the best means of arriving at the truth.

Here’s FIRE president Greg Lukianoff [talking about higher education](#): “In theory it’s supposed to be this utterly historically unique space where you are there to recognize that essentially we are really not that good at seeing the world the way it is, and it takes discipline and testing and experimentation and discussion to get anywhere near to the truth.”

In *The Shadow University*, the two co-founders of FIRE — Alan Charles Kors and Harvey Silverglate — clearly state that the sacred obligation of the university is to “pursue knowledge and truth, wherever they may lead.”

This quote recalls the [AAUP’s 1940 statement](#) on academic freedom: “Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and ... the common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.”

While *Veritas* may be on some of the most prominent university crests, “truth” is all but absent from the current mission statements of colleges and universities across the country.

Of the top 25 schools in FIRE's 2021 [College Free Speech Rankings](#), only one (Duke University) refers to "truth" in their mission statement. (The mission of Duke University is to "promote a deep appreciation for the range of human difference and potential, a sense of the obligations and rewards of citizenship, and a commitment to learning, freedom and truth.")

Across the mission statements of the 25 schools in FIRE's list, the main themes we noticed were critical thinking, diversity, preparation for citizenship, public service, the production and dissemination of knowledge and active, engaged learning in the liberal arts mold.

To give you a flavor of today's mission statements, here are three examples:

The mission of Claremont Mckenna College, number 1 on the FIRE list is: "to educate its students for thoughtful and productive lives and responsible leadership in business, government, and the professions, and to support faculty and student scholarship that contribute to intellectual vitality and the understanding of public policy issues."

The University of New Hampshire: "Its primary purpose is learning: students collaborating with faculty in teaching, research, creative expression and service."

The mission of Emory University "is to create, preserve, teach, and apply knowledge in the service of humanity."

Indeed, even two of the oldest (one might even say the crustiest) do not make any reference to the truth in their mission statements: The University of Oxford's mission is the "advancement of learning by teaching and research and its dissemination by every means." Cambridge University's mission, meanwhile, is "to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence."

The mission of the university cannot be seen as historically transcendent. The truth telos, as articulated by Haidt, is itself a product of a historical moment. For the medieval university it

was the search for biblical truth through the Scholastic method that was of paramount primacy. The motto *Dominus Illuminatio Mea* (“The Lord is my light”) on Oxford University’s coat of arms, and *Hinc lucem et pocula sacra* (“From here, light and sacred draughts”) on Cambridge’s crest, harken back to these times. By the early modern period the secularization of the university was reflected in the emphasis on human reason as the foundation for the modern university. By the nineteenth century the quest for theological truth as the mission of the university had given way to logical rationality, empiricism and the search for objective truths about nature and humankind. The concept of knowledge — the corpus of objective, empirically verifiable truths — was one steeped in positivism.

But a lot has happened within the academy over the past century or so. Challenges to conventional notions of truth can be seen in specific disciplines as well as via overarching schools of thought. Thomas Kuhn’s seminal work on how scientific “truths” are true within their paradigms was a major blow to the idea of the linear progress of science to unveil the truth. Gramsci’s historicism laid the foundation for critiques of empiricism and Foucault’s questioning of the idea of value-neutral knowledge had a seismic impact in the humanities. Postmodernist critiques of Enlightenment rationality and standpoint theory’s claim that knowledge is socially situated have further challenged the idea of objective truth.

While the sciences and some of the social sciences may have a more natural affinity for truth-seeking, many of the arts, humanities and interpretative social sciences do not regard truth-seeking as their *raison-d’être*. The humanities in particular pursue questions about interpretation, moral complexity, value and common humanity. As Judith Butler so astutely [points out](#):

In the humanities, the text or the object, or a certain constellation of both, continues to ground competing interpretations, but the text or object does not on its own answer the question of which interpretation is most persuasive or, indeed, most interesting. It neither coughs up a criterion nor enunciates a set of rules by which it ought to be approached. The encounter is more complicated, and neither is it a merely subjective

matter, depending as it does on the question posed to the object and what the reading or interpretation can illuminate ... For the most part, literary approaches are formulated in anticipation of their critics and, depending on the criticism, are revised or discarded over time. This open-ended process is generally favored over forms of dogmatism that claim only one right way exists.

In our discipline, history, the idea that historians can capture objective truth (history as it *really* happened) has been rejected as a fool's errand for more than a century. As the British historian Edward H. Carr wrote in the early 1960s, "The reconstitution of the past in the historian's mind is dependent on empirical evidence. But it is not in itself an empirical process, and cannot consist in a mere recital of facts. On the contrary, the process of reconstitution governs the selection and interpretation of facts: this, indeed, is what makes them historical facts."

Far more significant for us historians, are *interpretations* of the past — how meaning is made and how the same facts can be marshalled to yield varying and at times competing interpretations. As Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob observed in their landmark 1994 book "Telling the Truth About History": "The bits and pieces of records left from the past can be arranged into different and contending pictures."

Let's say we are looking at the question of why South Boston resisted school desegregation efforts in the 1960s and 1970s. Two historians, working from a similar set of archival records, could arrive at different conclusions. One says it was primarily due to antiblack sentiment and a racist backlash. Another that it was driven largely by anger at the erosion of local school control. Both interpretations have merit and are supported by relevant evidence. The fact that scholars can end up with opposing views is often, as Butler [says](#), "a sign of the field's intellectual vibrancy."

There are certainly [those](#) among us who see the shift away from truth-seeking as academe running off the rails and call for a return to the "true" mission of the university. But truth is not

a stable category to hitch the mission of higher ed to. It does not adequately reflect the teaching and research done by faculty in the arts, humanities, and interpretive social sciences.

There have been a [few](#) recent [suggestions](#) to rethink the university's mission, one of the most noteworthy being John Tomasi's [proposal](#) to center it around curiosity. While Tomasi's proposal is intriguing and a step in the right direction, we don't think it fully captures what it is that higher ed does. We propose a different telos: critical inquiry.

Our formulation of critical inquiry is inspired and heavily informed by the work of John Dewey, specifically a set of three lectures he delivered at the turn of the 20th century on "The School and Society."

Critical inquiry, as we see it, includes but is not limited to *critical thinking*. Dewey defined critical thinking as "the active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends." Building on Dewey we see it as a process that continually contends with the presuppositions that shape our thinking, interpretations, and judgements. The willingness to question established methods and orthodoxies is an essential aspect of critical thinking.

Critical inquiry harnesses the power of what Dewey saw as four natural human instincts or interests — that of:

1. Conversation and communication.
2. Investigation.
3. Construction (making things).
4. Artistic expression.

These, we maintain, are the four building blocks of critical inquiry. What Dewey called the essential "natural resources" for deep, transformative educational experiences. Critical inquiry knits these four instincts together, giving them shape, purpose and direction. How? By placing them in an educational context characterized by discipline, intentionality, self-awareness and

reflection. Critical inquiry seeks to cultivate habits of mind that go beyond mere curiosity about the world. It combines creativity, experimentation and evaluation in an ongoing, iterative process. It can encompass the full range of learning, teaching and research activities on college campuses, from experiments in particle physics to orchestra rehearsals of Brahms' concertos.

We have noticed that the membership for organizations like HxA and the AFA has clear demographic skews. Members are disproportionately white and male, while social scientists and natural scientists significantly outnumber members from humanities and the arts.

The best [statistics](#) we could find with respect to the distribution of faculty by field/department comes from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Here are some selected data points:

Postsecondary Teachers	960,300
Anthropology & Archeology	4,830
Area, Ethnic & Cultural Studies	8,680
Sociology	9,940
Economics	11,430
Physics	11,560
History	15,320
Foreign Language & Literature	16,740
Chemistry	16,860

Philosophy & Religion	19,950
Psychology	29,260
Biological Science	35,720
English Language & Literature	39,490
Business	61,800
Art, Drama & Music	69,360

Paying particular attention to the fields and numbers we have highlighted in bold, we include these statistics to underscore that there are tens of thousands of faculty members for whom the pursuit of truth may play only an incidental role in their professional work.

We think it's important to be both principled and pragmatic when it comes to spreading the academic freedom gospel. As professors in the humanities ourselves, it is our strong impression that appeals to academic freedom focused primarily or exclusively on truth alienate many people in the academy, especially those in the bolded fields above.

If we foreground critical inquiry as one of the key purposes of higher education, the following faculty members would see their work as falling under this broader umbrella:

- A mathematics professor who studies “number theory” as part of a research program in pure math.
- A theater professor who primarily teaches acting.
- An Africana studies professor whose scholarship focuses on “racial capitalism.”
- A religion professor whose teaching and scholarship explores Mahayana Buddhism in Japan and Korea.

You get the idea. For some professors, truth may be central to their teaching and research. For others, not so much. We do think, however, that academic freedom has a much wider appeal, especially when framed in terms of increasing threats to campus free expression. Many people in the arts and humanities, for example, have strong anti-censorship convictions. (Organizations like PEN and NCAC may speak more directly to these constituencies but there's no reason that the likes of FIRE can't too.)

If we are truly interested in viewpoint diversity, beyond political or ideological diversity, we need to create a bigger tent that includes academics who do not see truth-seeking as their calling. Indeed, adhering to truth risks creating precisely the kind of echo chamber that we all critique.

Self-Censorship or Just Being Nice? Understanding White College Students' Decisions About Classroom Speech³

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Paper presented at the 2021 FIRE Faculty Network Conference

October 14-16, 2021

Chicago, IL/Virtual

Abstract

The “free speech” or “self-censorship crisis” on college campuses is hotly debated, yet student self-censorship is a poorly understood phenomenon. As more and more states engage in legislative efforts to address this problem, it is critical that we develop a deeper understanding of how students think about speech on college campuses, and especially in college classrooms. In this article I summarize findings from my recent research on how students make decisions about speaking up, or not, in class discussions. Importantly, I discuss the many different decisions students are making about their speech, and the many factors that play a role in those decisions.

Campus ‘Free Speech’ Laws and the ‘Free Speech Crisis’ on College Campuses

³ This research was funded through the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement Fellows Program. A previous version of this paper was published on the Center’s website (<https://freespeechcenter.universityofcalifornia.edu/fellows-20-21/niehaus-research/>). This version has been updated with the 2021 FIRE College Free Speech Rankings report and with a more detailed description of the methodology of the study.

According to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE, n.d.), 22 states to date have enacted legislation ostensibly meant to protect free speech on college campuses. Many of these bills contain similar provisions, such as requiring institutions to adopt policies that are consistent with the University of Chicago Free Speech Policy Statement (Stone et al., 2014), include First Amendment or free speech training during freshman orientation, and punish students who prevent others from engaging in protected expression. Some of these policies *may* work to promote more freedom of expression on campus, but others are more concerning. Other states have enacted problematic legislation seeking to monitor faculty members' political affiliations or control their ability to express political viewpoints in their teaching and research. For example, a 2021 proposed bill in Iowa that would require the Board of Regents to survey employees at state universities on their political party affiliations and to report that information to the state legislature each year (Flaherty, 2021a). Although the legislation that was ultimately passed by the legislature did not contain such a provision, this latest attempt echoes previous efforts in Iowa and other states to assess and regulate faculty members' political affiliations (Flaherty, 2021a). Another bill recently passed in Florida allows students to record class sessions "in connection with a complaint to the public institution of higher education where the recording was made, or as evidence in, or in preparation for, a criminal or civil proceeding" (cited in Flaherty, 2021b, para 2). As Flaherty (2021b) argued, "the bill can be read as encouraging students to snitch on professors they disagree with politically" (para. 4).

Many of these legislative efforts are grounded in the belief that institutions of higher education, and in particular faculty in higher education, are attempting to indoctrinate students with leftist beliefs and are suppressing dissenting viewpoints. For example, in a recent debate over higher education funding in Idaho, state Rep. Ron Nate wrote that those in the legislature "have a responsibility to make sure the money truly goes to excellence in higher education and does not work against Idaho values and American values by promoting Marxist ideologies and racial dogmatism" (as cited by Davlin, 2021). The Idaho legislature later passed a bill prohibiting public institutions, including colleges and universities, from "directly or otherwise compel[ling] students to personally affirm, adopt, adhere to" specific tenets that the bill claims are "often found in 'critical race theory'" (Idaho H.B. 377 2021, p. 1). As of June of 2021, 21 states had

introduced or passed legislation banning critical race theory in schools (Ononye & Walker, 2021).

However problematic aspects of these laws might be from the perspective of free speech and academic freedom, as Jeffrey Sachs recently argued, lawmakers are responding to something very real (PEN America, 2021) – multiple surveys have repeatedly found that many students refrain from speaking up about important issues in the classroom, and students who identify politically as conservative are more likely to do so than students who identify as liberal. For example, a recent report from FIRE (2021) asserted that “there are marked differences in the area of political orientation” when it comes to reported self-censorship, with conservative students reporting more self-censorship than liberal students or those who identify as neither liberal or conservative (p. 11). Similarly, a report from Gallup (2020), in collaboration with the Knight Foundation, found that students who identified as Republican were far more likely than those who identified as Democrats to agree or strongly agree with the statement, “the climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive” (p. 35; 74% for Republicans vs. 58% for Democrats). This same report found that Republicans were far less comfortable “voicing disagreement with ideas expressed by the instructor or other students” (p. 39) in class discussions (45% of Republicans were comfortable or very comfortable, vs. 69% of Democrats).

To be fair, no one survey, or even a set of surveys, can answer all of our questions about students’ views of their own and others’ speech on campus. However, the fact that these surveys are used to make arguments about a self-censorship⁴ crisis on campus, particularly one that needs to be solved through restrictive legislation, is problematic, especially if we do not understand what these surveys are actually telling us. Below I review three of the most

⁴ Although I find the term “self-censorship” to contribute to a problematic, overly simplistic narrative about speech issues on campus, and prefer Cortés’s (2019) use of the term “self-editing,” overwhelmingly those in politics, the media, and even on campus use and recognize the term self-censorship when discussing students’ choices around their own speech. As such, I have intentionally chosen to use the term “self-censorship” throughout this article in order to enter into that ongoing conversation. However, I think it is important to consider the extent to which our use of the term self-censorship is appropriate and whether it helps us understand and address the problem. Based on my own research, summarized here, I think it is likely that the narrative around student self-censorship is actually part of the problem.

commonly cited surveys — from FIRE, Gallup/Knight Foundation, and Heterodox Academy — and discuss the problems with how those surveys are often interpreted in the media and by others who make claims about indoctrination and censorship on campus.

FIRE 2021 College Free Speech Rankings

FIRE (2021) recently conducted a survey in order to “rank” institutions based on the climate for free speech on campus, following-up on a similar 2020 ranking. The 2021 survey included a question asking students how often they “felt that [they] could not express [their] opinion on a subject because of how students, a professor, or the administration would respond?” (p. 6); students could respond with options ranging from “never” to “very often.” The authors of the report interpreted any response other than “never” as reflecting “self-censorship,” and highlighted the fact that 80% of students indicated that they at least occasionally felt this way. Although this question is an improvement over the previous version of the survey, which included a similar question with a simple yes/no response, there are still a number of problems with the 2021 version of the question and the subsequent interpretation. For example, did students actually stop themselves from expressing those opinions as a result of those feelings? What responses from students, professors, or administration were they thinking about when answering this question? On what basis had they formed their predictions of how others would respond? Is this something that the students themselves feel is a problem, or is it simply a matter of students making common choices about how they approach discussions based on their audience? Are students taking the time to think through how many times they have actually done this and then whether that means they hold back their opinions “rarely,” “occasionally,” or “fairly often”? Or are they just answering based on a gut feeling? Despite the fact that the data generated from this survey question led to more questions than answers, the authors of this report interpret the data as indicating high levels of “self-censorship,” which is never really defined.

Gallup/Knight Foundation First Amendment on Campus 2020 Report

In a somewhat different approach to understanding students' experiences with the climate for free speech on campus, as part of their recurring First Amendment survey Gallup (2020) asked students the extent to which they agreed with the statement, "the climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive" (p. 35). Although the authors do refrain from over-interpreting findings based on this question, the question asks students what they think other students are thinking about and doing, not about students' own thoughts and actions. Some students may interpret this question as asking about their own experience, while others may interpret the question as it is written and try to guess how other students feel on campus. Additionally, their responses may be more indicative of a broader media narrative of self-censorship on campus, rather than any true assessment of the actual campus climate. This same survey asked students how comfortable they themselves were "voicing disagreement with ideas expressed by the instructor or other students" (p. 39) in class discussions. While this item is better than the first in that it asks for students to report on their own behavior, it conflates discomfort with disagreeing with the instructor and with disagreeing with other students, which may be vastly different phenomena and require vastly different solutions to address. It also does not get at why students are or are not comfortable, or what they do in response — students may be uncomfortable but may voice their disagreement anyway, or they may be perfectly comfortable doing so but refrain for other reasons.

Heterodox Academy 2021 Report on Understanding the Campus Expression Climate

A 2020 survey from Heterodox Academy (Stikma, 2021) took the issue one step further, not only asking students about the issues they were reluctant to speak about on campus, but also the potential consequences that students feared. Heterodox Academy researchers asked students the same question asked in the Gallup (2020) survey: the extent to which they agreed with the statement, "the climate on my campus prevents some people from saying things they

believe because others might find them offensive” (Stikma 2021, p. 5), but then asked a series of questions about specific issues. They asked, “Think about discussing a controversial issue about [gender, politics, race or ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation] in a class this semester. How comfortable or reluctant would be feel about speaking up and giving your views on this topic?” with answer options ranging from “I would be very comfortable giving my views” to “I would be very reluctant giving my views.” If students indicated any reluctance, they were asked “if you were to speak up and give your views on one of the controversial issues during a class discussion, would you be concerned that any of the following would happen?” with a list of answer options:

- Other students would criticize my views as offensive
- The professor would say my views are wrong
- The professor would criticize my views as offensive
- The professor would give me a lower grade because of my views
- Someone would post critical comments about my views on social media
- Someone would file a complaint claiming my views violated a campus harassment policy
- I would cause others psychological harm
- Other concerns or consequences? Please list below

(Heterodox Academy, 2021, pp. 2-3)

Although this is a far more detailed question, particularly in terms of getting into feared consequences, there are still two key issues. First, being comfortable or reluctant speaking does not necessary mean that students actually do or do not speak up. These are likely to be correlated, but there are many other factors that could influence whether a student actually shares their beliefs in class. Second, giving students a list of reasons to be uncomfortable might not actually reflect how they are making these decisions.

The Problem with Poorly Defined Problems

In the lead-in to their Fall 2019 survey report, Heterodox Academy researchers make a strong statement about the problems of self-censorship they claim to identify in their findings:

When students sit on the sidelines of their own education — unable or unwilling to share their views on a range of challenging topics — their learning suffers, as does that of their peers. Reports show that some students are reluctant to speak their opinions in the classroom, censoring themselves in discussions. Self-censorship in a university setting is of great concern not only to educators but to the society as a whole, as today's college students are tomorrow's leaders. (Stikma 2020, p. 3)

The question remains, however — is this really what is going on? Are students really engaging in “self-censorship”? What does that really mean in practice? How and why are students making these decisions about speaking out in class or not?

This may seem like splitting hairs — do the nuances of this phenomenon really matter, or is it enough to know that students say that they hold back their opinions in class (or at least feel like doing so)? I argue that self-censorship on campus is an ill-defined problem, and the reasons students do or do not engage in self-censorship is poorly understood. When we don't know what the problem really is, the solutions we try to implement may be ineffective at best, and at worst, actually exacerbate the issue. If we truly want to encourage more expression of more diverse points of view in college classrooms and elsewhere on campus, it is essential that we understand how students are actually thinking about and making decisions about expressing their own ideas.

The Present Study: What do Students Actually Think About Their Own Speech on Campus?

The purpose of this study was to explore how college students think about and make decisions about their own speech on campus, and in particular, in college classrooms. To examine this topic, I conducted a sequential mixed-methods study (Creswell, 2003), where I first collected survey data and then used that data as the basis for an in-depth qualitative examination of the

issue using Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist Grounded Theory is a particularly good method for examining decision making processes, and how students construct meaning in ways that influence their decisions (Charmaz, 2014).

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

In the initial, quantitative phase of the study, I collected survey data from 275 college students at a predominantly and historically White, research-extensive, public institution in the Great Plains region of the United States. In order to get a diverse sample of student responses, I advertised the survey on posters, fliers, and digital displays in the student union, dining halls, residence halls, and academic buildings. I also advertised the survey via social media and had an email advertisement that academic advisors and student affairs professionals sent out to students in their networks. Through the survey I collected demographic information, and then following the basic model of previous surveys, I asked students, “how often do you keep an opinion related to class to yourself because you are worried about the potential consequence of expressing that opinion?” Response options included never, seldom, sometimes, often, and always. The last section of the survey included one of two scenarios, randomly assigned, where students read about another student making a potentially offensive statement in class, targeted at either police officers or Black Lives Matter protesters, and then answered a series of questions about that scenario. Students’ responses to that part of the survey (and the subsequent follow-up discussions in the qualitative phase of the study) are not part of this particular paper.

In order to explore the extent to which students kept opinions to themselves in class, I examined basic frequencies for students’ responses to this question. I then conducted an ANOVA to determine whether there were differences in students’ responses based on their self-reported political identification.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

In the qualitative, grounded theory phase of this study, I purposefully selected students to interview using maximum variation sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) based on their political self-identification, how often they reported keeping opinions to themselves in class, and their responses to the scenarios presented in the survey, in order to explore a wide array of student perspectives and experiences that could contribute to my understanding of how students navigate decisions around classroom speech (Morse & Clarke, 2019). In this phase I intentionally selected only White students to interview, as students from majoritized identity groups are likely to have very different reasons for making decisions about speaking up in the classroom compared to those from minoritized identity groups (e.g., Lee & McCabe, 2021).

I interviewed 16 total students and was able to conduct a second interview with 10 of those students. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, although many interviews ran over the allotted time, and were transcribed verbatim. The first interview was designed to focus on students' responses to the scenarios presented in the survey, and so mainly explored students' judgements about other students' speech, while the second interview was designed to focus mostly on students' decisions about their own classroom speech; however, both topics came up in both interviews with most students, as their judgements about their own and others' speech were closely connected. I used a semi-structured interview protocol in the interviews, using a responsive interview approach (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I also drew from Carter's (2020) techniques for probing moral and ethical decision-making using counterfactuals. This allowed me to put students' perspectives into conversation with one another in these individual interviews, as I was able to present students with conflicting points of view (e.g., "some students have argued X, what are your thoughts on that perspective?") while maintaining rapport with each interviewee.

Consistent with grounded theory methods, I engaged in data collection and data analysis simultaneously (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Morse & Clark, 2019). I began with just a few initial interviews, wrote extensive memos after each interview, and then did an initial

round of data analysis using Corbin and Strauss's (2008) initial coding approach. Based on my initial analysis, I then selected additional participants who could best inform my understanding of the emerging phenomena I was seeing in the data, conducted additional analysis, and then selected additional participants (Morse & Clarke, 2019).

After I had completed all of the interviews and the first round of coding, I focused in on the topic of self-censorship and students' decisions about their own speech. Using Dedoose, I engaged in a process of line-by-line open coding (Charmaz, 2008), focusing on any part of an interview where a student was discussing their own classroom speech. I then downloaded the list of codes that I had developed from Dedoose and engaged in axial coding (Charmaz, 2008) to start to identify patterns and themes in the data. Finally, I looked at the connections among the axial codes through a theoretical coding process in order to develop the final findings for this study.

I used a number of techniques to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings. First and most importantly, consistent with my constructivist approach, I used extensive member checking (Charmaz, 2014) during the second interviews. I discussed my initial interpretations of students' first interviews with them during the second interviews, along with my emerging understanding of the data across interview participants. This helped me check and revise my interpretations based on students' feedback. Second, appropriate to grounded theory, I carefully developed sensitivity to the theoretical concepts related to the study before and throughout the data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Thornberg & Dunne, 2019). Third, I engaged in extensive memoing, both as a form of initial data analysis and as a way to check my own biases and assumptions throughout the process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Finally, I continued collecting data until I was confident that I had sufficient data to fully explore the topic, contributing to the credibility of the study (Charmaz, 2014).

On the Surface: The Quantitative Findings

My survey data reflect a predominantly White but politically fairly diverse group of college students. In terms of race/ethnicity, 6% identified as Asian American, 3% as Bi/Multiracial, 4% as Black/African American, 11% as Hispanic/Latino/a/x, less than 1% as Middle Eastern, 2% as Native American, 79% as White, and 2% as another race/ethnicity not listed (students could choose multiple, so these % add up to just over 100%). Politically, 23% identified as very liberal, 30% as liberal, 20% as middle of the road, 17% as somewhat conservative, and 10% as very conservative. Students who responded to the survey ranged in age from 18 to over 40 years old, with the vast majority of students between the ages of 18 and 21 (19% were 18 years old, 24% were 19, 20% were 20, and 20% were 21). In terms of gender, 29% identified as men, 70% as women, and just under 1% as trans or non-binary.

When asked “how often do you keep an opinion related to class to yourself because you are worried about the potential consequence of expressing that opinion?”, responses were broadly distributed, with 7% of students responding “never,” 16% “seldom,” 43% “sometimes,” 25% “often,” and 9% “always.” The vast majority of students responded that they at least “sometimes” kept their opinions to themselves in class.

Similar to prior research, students who identified as somewhat or very conservative answered that they were significantly more likely to keep opinions to themselves than students who identified as middle-of-the-road or somewhat or very liberal ($p < .001$); there was no significant difference between middle-of-the-road and somewhat or very liberal students. The overall mean was 3.0 (“sometimes”) across all political groups, but the mean for somewhat or very liberal students was 2.84 and the mean for somewhat or very conservative students was 3.80 (closer to “often”). Put in other terms, only 17% of somewhat/very liberal students said that they “often” or “always” kept opinions to themselves in class, while 69% of somewhat/very conservative students did so. However, still only 8% of somewhat/very liberal students and 7% of middle-of-the-road said that they “never” keep opinions to themselves; for conservative students, 5% said that they never did so.

Digging Deeper: The Qualitative Findings

As mentioned above, I interviewed 16 total students; 10 of those students participated in two interviews. Demographically, ten of the interview participants identified as women and six as men; as noted above, all identified as White. Politically, four identified as “very liberal,” four as “somewhat liberal,” two as “middle-of-the-road,” five as “somewhat conservative,” and one as “very conservative.” In terms of how often they held back opinions in class discussions, one replied “always,” six “often,” six “sometimes,” one “seldom,” and two “never.”

Overall, there were two key dimensions to my findings: the decisions that students are making about their classroom speech, and how they are making those decisions. I describe each in more detail below. For context, when discussing participants’ decisions about their classroom speech below, I indicate in parentheses their political identification and how often they said they held back an opinion in class.

To Speak or Not to Speak? That Isn’t the Only Question.

In speaking with the participants in my research over the past year, it became clear to me that all students make choices about their own speech, in and out of the classroom — even the students who claimed on the survey to “never” hold back from sharing their opinions in class. In fact, there did not seem to be much of a relationship between a students’ answer on the survey and their ability to come up with specific examples of when they had chosen not to speak up in class. For example, Sarah (very liberal, “never”), did in general see herself as a person who was not afraid to speak her mind. However, when I asked her about this survey question in the interview, she immediately came up with specific examples of when she had not spoken up in class, and principles for when she would not speak up in general. At the time of the interview, she was taking an introductory course as a junior, and the other students in the course were generally first year students. She discussed how even though she knew a lot and cared deeply about the issues they were discussing, she was hesitant to speak up because she was not sure

whether doing so would actually help the other students in the class learn and develop. She had also come to the realization that her campus was far more conservative than what she had been used to before coming to college. This made her uncomfortable and uncertain of how to best navigate this particular course.

Knowing Your Audience

Sarah's experience navigating classroom dynamics was not unique. In talking with students about their experiences with speaking up or not in class discussions, it became clear that this was not just a choice about whether or not to speak up. Students were also thinking about how the contexts they were in influenced when and where they should speak, to whom they should speak, what they should or should not say, and how they should say it. For example, when discussing what he considers before speaking up in class, Eric (somewhat conservative, "often") explained,

I personally try to avoid hurting other people's feelings. That's really not necessary. So, I would choose my words as wisely as I can. But that wouldn't really change the meaning of what I'm trying to say. It might just change how I say it.

Eric's explanation here reflects a number of common themes throughout my interviews. Students wanted to consider who was in the audience and how they would receive what the student was trying to say, so would be thoughtful about how they expressed themselves. Many students, like Eric, wanted to avoid hurting other people's feelings, and overall just wanted to be kind and respectful of other people. Greg (somewhat conservative, "sometimes") explained, "If I don't have to, I don't like upsetting people." Julia (very liberal, "sometimes") noted that this is just common courtesy; it is about "just being cognizant of the people around you. Realizing that you're not the end all be all. What you think is not the end all be all."

Although this consideration of audience did not hold Eric back from speaking up, other students discussed holding back when they did not know their audience well. In discussing a hypothetical

class discussion, Lucy (somewhat conservative, “often”) explained, “I feel like I personally kind of hold back on stuff like that unless I really know my audience. And just being probably a large... class, I would not know my audience there really.” Sarah (very liberal, “never”) similarly discussed how not knowing her audience, particularly online “where it’s like 50 cameras off and I don’t know who I’m talking to,” made her hesitate to speak up, particularly about marginalized identities she held.

As Sarah’s comment reflects, knowing your audience is not just about being considerate of others; it is also about weighing how others are likely to respond to and judge you for your comments. Although Chloe (somewhat liberal, “often”) said that it was easier in college, in high school she felt a lot of social pressure not to share opinions that were different from the majority of students. She explained, “I lived in a really small, really conservative town. It didn’t really align with my feelings and thoughts, so I felt like a lot of the time it was just easier not to give my opinion.” When I asked what she was afraid of if she did share her opinion, she said, “embarrassment. I guess losing friends maybe ... people finding me difficult so they didn’t want to spend time with me maybe.” Jason (somewhat conservative, often) expressed a similar approach, considering how others might judge him for what he said in class:

I'm [in college] to learn and try and make some connections. I don't necessarily want to squander those just based off of a single point of view, because I feel like A, the person that I'm talking to will disagree with me. Or B, they will share the way that I feel to somebody else who, if I was talking to directly, they might not necessarily disagree with me, but because it's through an informal connection, they're more likely to be like, “Oh, he's taking a strong viewpoint that most people don't share. I don't want to necessarily talk to him anymore.”

The Importance of Important Relationships

Students often considered their relationships with others in the audience, and whether or not those relationships mattered to them, in their decisions about speaking up. Lucy (somewhat

conservative, “often”) explained how she was more likely to discuss difficult issues with people she was close to — her roommates, people she worked closely with in a student organization, friends, and immediate family members. Dana felt that people who knew her well would be less likely to take offense if she shared her opinion: “if it was with someone I knew like a friend, I could be more open to sharing, just because I know that they know who I am. So if I say something that was wrong, they can tell me.” For Emily (middle-of-the-road, “often”), on the other hand, having a close professional relationship with the people she was talking to often led to her holding back her opinions for the sake of maintaining those relationships:

When I do the cost-benefit analysis a lot of times I feel like it'd be more worth it to maintain a solid working relationship. Yes, there could be certain things benefitted by bringing up those different ideas and getting to think about it, but then in the end I feel like in a lot of these situations it's like how I get along and work with people I'm around will end up being more important because it just improves the quality of relationships in the workplace.

Eric (somewhat conservative, “often”) discussed how when relationships do not matter to him, they do not factor into his decisions. When I asked him whether he had ever had an experience where he felt like other students would judge him or ostracize him in some way because of something he said, he replied, “I have had those instances, but when that happens I don't really care, because I don't need to be friends with them always.” He went on to explain further,

I have friends already, I guess. So, I have a pretty strong friend group that I can rely on. So, I'm not worried about making a lot more friends, and I don't really want to be friends with people who disagree with me on very fundamental values. So, a lot of the times, I'm just not afraid to share my opinion.

In contrast to the other students described above who were concerned about the social consequences of speaking up, Eric, and other students like him, did not feel the need to have a relationship with other students in his classes who might react negatively to his opinions.

(Un)Productive Contributions to the Discussion

For many students much of this consideration of audience came back to the idea of effective communication — how can you best make the point you want to make in a way that others can hear? Mason (very liberal, “sometimes”) explained how being argumentative “can be interesting in a lot of scenarios,” but ultimately, “when you're being argumentative, there’s always this air of smugness, or of, ‘I think I'm right and I want to win’...I think it's just not conducive to actual discussion.” Emily (middle-of-the-road, “often”) explained how if you make an argument “emotionally, it gets lost,” so you should try to present your perspective “tactfully, but also meaningfully.” In describing a class discussion where she chose not to speak up, Chloe (somewhat liberal, “often”) explained how her opinion was already being represented in the discussion, and adding her own voice would not have been productive. She explained, “I didn’t want the person that I disagree with to feel like I was attacking them,” because once someone starts to feel attacked, “the argument’s going to start turning not productive.”

Another important dimension of this, though, was whether students thought that there was any potential for productive discussion about a topic. If not, what was the use in speaking up? In discussing the same scenario mentioned above where she chose not to share her opinion, Chloe went on to explain when conflict is and is not productive. She explained,

I think sometimes [conflict is] productive, but when it comes to things like that and they’re passionate about it... I don’t think I can change people’s opinions... When it comes to class discussion, some person that doesn’t know me isn’t going to change their opinion on abortion when they’ve been raised a certain way their whole life to think a certain way.

In this situation, Chloe did not see much potential benefit in sharing her opinion in class, and instead saw that if she did choose to speak up, it might lead to unnecessary and unproductive conflict.

The Right (or Wrong) Time and Place

In addition to considering the other people with whom they were speaking, students also discussed what was or was not appropriate in an academic, classroom context. Mason (very liberal, “sometimes”) discussed how it was important in a class discussion to stay on topic and not distract from the professor’s overall lesson plan: “Having a discussion can be great, and interesting for a lot of people to listen to if they want to. But it can also distract from the lesson, and take the whole thing off-topic.” This meant that sometimes, even if he did disagree with something a professor or another student said, it just was not the right time and place to voice his disagreement. Emily (middle-of-the-road, “often”) expressed a similar sentiment, explaining that she did not speak up in a particular class because “there might be certain classes that encourage debate, and this just wasn’t one of them. This was just a lecture and so I was like, well I’ll just learn the material and move on.”

Despite the fact that on its face, self-censorship seems like a fairly straightforward concept — students choose to speak up or not — it is clear from these students’ experiences that there is a lot more to these decisions. Students carefully considered the contexts they were in, who they were speaking to, how they might communicate their points most effectively, and whether it was really the time or place to even try to share their opinion. Even though students generally considered similar contextual factors in deciding whether or not to speak up, though, the decisions any one student came to were sometimes quite different from the decisions other students made. In the next section I dig deeper into what is influencing students’ speech decisions in college classrooms.

How do Students Make these Decisions? ‘It’s a Mixture of Everything’

In discussing her discomfort with the idea of sharing her opinion in class, Dana (somewhat conservative, “often”) summed up the core finding from my interviews when it came to how students are making these decisions — “it’s a mixture of everything.” Just as the decisions that students were making went far beyond a simple question of speaking up or not, the factors that went into their decisions were also complex. Figure 1⁵ is a visual representation of this

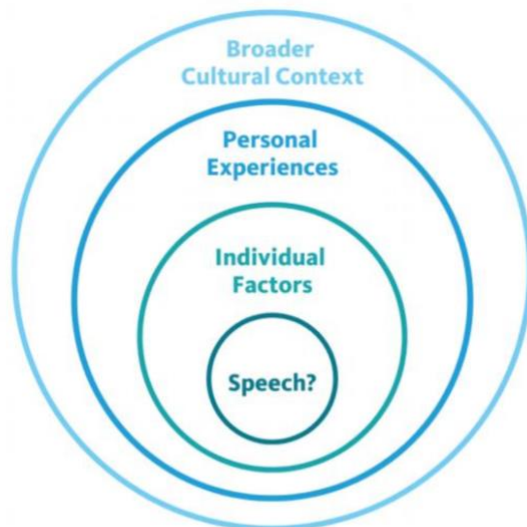


Figure 1: What influences students' decisions about classroom speech?

complexity. Students' decisions about classroom speech are shaped by the broader cultural context, personal experiences, and individual factors, all of which interact with each other in complex ways.

The Broader Cultural Context

In discussing their decisions about classroom speech, students made a wide array of references to the broader culture and how that influenced their perceptions about what they should or should not say in class discussions. These included political polarization in the U.S.; the cultural

⁵ Readers familiar with student development theory will notice similarities between this model and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Although I did not use Bronfenbrenner's theory as a guiding framework for this study, my familiarity with his work clearly influenced my visual representation of my own findings.

narrative around “cancel culture,” which was heavily influenced by what they saw on social media; messages they received, again often from social media, about specific words or topics that were off-limits; the overall political climate, especially around issues of race; and the COVID-19 pandemic’s influence on their virtual and in-person classroom experiences⁶. Lucy (somewhat conservative, often), for example, referenced the ongoing racial tensions, both locally and nationally, in how she thought about what students should or should not say in class. She explained, “I would be so careful and want to tiptoe around ... I think for the past couple of months everyone has just been kind of on edge and being very sensitive to everything.” When it comes to “cancel culture,” a number of students referenced being influenced by seeing people getting attacked on social media, as Jason (somewhat conservative, “often”) described:

I’ve spent a considerable amount of time on the internet, and I’ve seen a lot of cancel culture, and a lot of you say something controversial, you get cancelled. And people just jump on the bandwagon because they’re jumping on the bandwagon and they want to ruin someone’s life.

Students also discussed broader cultural messages, often conveyed through social media but also through family and/or religious institutions, about specific words that were not okay to say. Many of these students referenced the n-word, but they also discussed swearing/curse words, insults, other slurs, and things that would just be offensive to others. Dana (somewhat conservative, “often”), for example, explained, “I just feel like all the news and media stuff ... I just don’t want to say something that’s like plainly wrong or offend anyone.” This sentiment was echoed by Julia (very liberal, “sometimes”) who explained, “the ways that I stay updated [on what is and is not okay to say] would be through probably just what I read and watch on social media more than anything.”

⁶ For context, I collected both survey and interview data during the 2020/2021 academic year at an institution that was working under a hybrid model, with some courses offered face-to-face with masks and social distancing requirements, others offered online, and still others offered in various hybrid models.

Personal Experiences

In addition to being influenced by broader cultural factors, students often drew on their direct personal experiences when making decisions about classroom speech. These included prior high school and college classroom discussions, their experience (and often lack of experience) discussing difficult subjects and interacting with people different from themselves, the social networks that they had on and off campus, the media and social media they consumed, and conversations with friends and family.

Although it was rare, some students did have specific examples of negative experiences with professors or other students, either in high school or college. Eric (somewhat conservative, “often”), for example, discussed how he perceived faculty bias in one of his courses, as he was assigned to “write a paper proving the existence of systemic racial injustice in America” using “a list of assigned evidence,” despite the fact that he believed “there were a lot of things to the contrary that could be found.” Julia (very liberal, “sometimes”) discussed a situation in high school where pressure from other students kept her from speaking out. She explained,

I went to high school in a very conservative town and a very conservative young man would be over the top about [voting for Trump]... this guy, he was the quarterback of the football team and sharing everything that he felt and people really liked him. You didn’t want to say the wrong thing and then get made fun of.

Although she was more comfortable speaking up in college, these types of experiences still stuck with her and made her think twice before sharing her political views. This was particularly the case in her small, cohort-based academic major, which was in a more traditionally conservative field. She explained, that many of her classmates came from similar conservative small town backgrounds, and

in my really small classes, [other students] were very cliquey... and I was not part of those cliques. And so I would kind of be afraid to share out some of the things I was

thinking or feeling because I didn't want those people to think less of me, especially as [a professional in the field].

Students' views on whether or not they could openly share their opinions were not always based on direct personal experience, however; often they were based in vicarious experience or what they heard through their social networks. Greg (somewhat conservative, "sometimes"), for example, talked at length about how it can be a problem "if the teacher's clearly for one side" of an issue. When I asked if he had experiences like this in college or if it is just what he has heard from others, he said

I've heard it before... my brother's even more opinionated than me and he's much smarter and knowledgeable about what he's talking about, but I just hear people talking. It's like, 'I don't believe this side of the argument, but I just wrote this side of the argument for the teacher's sake and for my grade's sake.' But I haven't experienced it.

Emily (middle-of-the-road, "often") expressed a similar sentiment when talking about a class she had where they were discussing social issues and she felt "like there's more that goes into it than what [the professor was] saying," but she didn't speak up to voice her concerns because "I worried that maybe it would affect the way that maybe my professor sees me or looks at my work." Emily went on to describe, however, that her perception of that experience had more to do with things that her friends have told her than with how the professor handled the class:

As far as the way she dealt with the class, I mean super nice, super respectful, inclusive. It was probably more on my end, more of the fear of based on maybe what other people have said to me, about maybe not the same class but other classes, more of just even if I did disagree it would be better for me if I didn't.

In this way students' social networks, the people they talked to and relied on for advice in navigating college, heavily influenced what they felt they could and could not say in class.

Students' lack of prior experiences also influenced their decisions about speaking up in class; many students described not having a lot of pre-college experience discussing difficult issues

with people who held very different beliefs, which made it more difficult for them to navigate these situations once they were in college. Dana (somewhat conservative, “often”) described how going to a Catholic high school, “everyone’s mindsets were similar-ish or you wouldn’t talk.” This meant that “the discussions that I’ve had... have been about, I don’t know, just super mundane, not super heated topics.” Once she got to college this dynamic didn’t change much, as she was primarily in science and math classes and hadn’t had any discussion-based classes so far.

On the other end of the political spectrum, Sarah (very liberal, “never”) described how her high school experience was similarly filled with like-minded people:

I have a weird background in that my circle of people that I’ve always been in has always been extremely progressive and friendly towards all identities. My parents very much instilled that in me and my high school was very much a progressive bubble, and so we had that comfortability to be able to speak our beliefs and be open about ourselves.

Although this experience helped Sarah build a foundation of knowledge and confidence in her beliefs that helped her be outspoken in many classes, as discussed previously, she came to realize that in settings where she could not be confident that everyone agreed with her, she was much less confident speaking up. She explained, “I’m just the kind of person that I struggle when people don’t have the same beliefs, have very polar opposite beliefs to me.”

Of course, not all of students’ prior experiences made them hesitate to speak up. Students talked about experiences they had sharing potentially controversial opinions where nothing bad happened, of only having positive experiences with high school teachers and college professors, and of feeling like college was a much more open environment than high school.

Alexander (middle-of-the-road, “never”) had vastly different experiences than many of the other students who I interviewed, in large part because he had been home schooled up until college. He explained:

I was homeschooled all of my life, so college is actually my first public school experience. So, we always had the freedom to speak out. Dad actually actively encouraged us to speak out and form our own opinions in class and critically think about topics.... I never had that fear instilled in me, speaking up and potentially having things taken out of context, and be punishable by an authority.

Alexander described a number of experiences, before and during college, engaging with a wide array of people in discussion of many different controversial topics.

Another important aspect of Alexander's experience is that he had no presence on most social media platforms, which meant he did not have to worry about anything he said blowing up on social media. He explained,

No one is able to track me down, no one is able to flay me on social media for anything, just by virtue of me not existing on social media. So in a sense, I'm more able to say stuff ... I can say the most controversial thing I wanted and no one has any way to contact me.

Alexander's experience was out of the ordinary with his non-traditional home school background, but the contrast highlights important aspects of students' prior experiences that shape their approaches to speaking up in the classroom.

Individual Factors

The most proximal influence on students' decisions about their classroom speech were the individual factors — things that were individual to each student and that interacted with the broader cultural context and their personal experiences to influence their speech choices in different ways. These individual factors included students' interests, religious and other beliefs, and goals, along with how students individually viewed the purpose of higher education and how they should interact with professors and other students in an academic environment.

Often students' interests, values, and academic goals influenced their speech decisions, because often students just did not care enough about a particular topic to engage. Sarah (very liberal, "never"), for example, explained that on certain topics, she just does not care enough to speak up, even if she thinks they are generally important issues:

There's certain topics that I don't necessarily get that upset about, upset enough to talk about, like women's rights. That's something that's been my entire life, I've cared very deeply about, and that's a factor of my identity where it's concerned, but I won't necessarily get super impassioned about it and want to speak up about it.

Greg (somewhat conservative, "sometimes") similarly discussed how sometimes he does not share his own opinion because it just does not matter that much. In describing why he did not share his own opinion on COVID vaccination in a class discussion, he explained:

I didn't think it was that important, because, I mean, it wasn't an intense discussion or anything like that. And I didn't think anybody was saying anything that was wrong or that I could argue that was wrong. It was just my personal opinion that I don't feel the need to get [into] it at the moment.

Other students reflected similar perspectives, not speaking up because they did not care about the topic, did not have strong opinions, or just overall were not interested in engaging in political discussions. Often they talked about how they did not know much about these issues, but also did not care enough to learn enough to engage in more serious discussions. As Jason (somewhat conservative, "often") explained, "I don't feel like I necessarily know everything that I want to know about this topic to really discuss it with my peers... [and] I don't necessarily have the time or want to put that work into that."

Other times students felt the issues that came up were important enough to inspire them to speak, often regardless of the consequences. Despite being reluctant to speak up in many situations, Emily (middle-of-the-road, "often") discussed how she was incredibly passionate

about people with special needs, and would always speak up if someone used derogatory language when talking about someone with special needs:

I do this around my friends, and I'll do it around my coworkers too, if people make either derogatory jokes about special needs people or use the word r*, I hate that word, I have a cousin who is autistic and I hate it when people use that word, so if people say that when I'm around them I'll be like, "No, don't say that. Don't use that word, say something else."

Similarly, both Greg and Sarah discussed situations where they *did* care enough to speak up. In describing a personal, traumatic experience she had around a particular social issue, Sarah described how when the topic would come up in class, she had such a strong reaction that she didn't even think about how to respond, she just did: "when I would hear that kind of stuff in class it was just like knee jerk reaction. I'm like, 'What the f*?' I just can't." Greg also described how on some issues, he just cannot stand not to speak up: "something that I really think needs to be said, I'll say it because otherwise I just sit in my seat twitching basically."

Another key internal factor guiding students' speech decisions was how they saw the purpose of education, and especially of class discussions, and how they saw their role in the classroom. For some students, class discussions were all about testing out new ideas, hearing other perspectives, and refining their own beliefs. Alexander (middle-of-the-road, "never"), for example, talked about how much he enjoyed discussing controversial topics:

It's super fascinating to bring up a controversial topic and just see how people react to it, see who takes what side? Who's willing to change based on the flow of it, versus who keeps their own opinion? Who might keep their own opinions, but then see they're wrong, and will they either A, keep defending and hold on with a rock-solid grip, or B, change to the more sensible opinion? There's a whole interesting dynamic there that I love to experience.

Greg (somewhat conservative, “sometimes”) similarly discussed how, although as a more right-leaning person he did not often find left-leaning people open to discussion, he really wanted to have more opportunities to engage with people who had different political perspectives from his own:

So when I do find somebody that is much more left-leaning than I am, I really enjoy having conversations with them so I do understand what their point of view is in those cases, and maybe I want to change mine. Whether I want to change my opinion or not, I just better understand the situation from different points of view. And that's why I think discussion is so important, is you don't have to agree with them, but you just have to actually understand where they're coming from.

Greg and Alexander’s comments are examples of an approach to education, and an expectation, that education is about discovery and about learning new things from discussion. For other students, though, education was about being a recipient of knowledge more than an active participant. They saw themselves as being in class to learn, often from the professor, and when they engaged in class discussion, it was to express a fully formed, knowledgeable perspective. Dana (somewhat conservative, “often”), for example, did not feel like she knew enough about topics she was discussing in some of her classes, so she said, “I feel like I just stay quiet and listen and absorb information rather than talking about it. So yeah, I feel like in most cases I just hold back.” Jason (somewhat conservative, often) expressed a similar notion of learning as taking in new information, explaining, “I don't necessarily share my viewpoint every single chance I get because college is not the time where I'm supposed to be talking. I'm supposed to be learning more than I'm supposed to be talking.” He saw his education being about learning specific facts that he needed to know for his future career, explaining:

[T]his is the foundation for my education and the foundation for my job. The specific opinions don't necessarily change the facts. The fact is a doorway should be at least three feet wide ... I'm learning a lot about the facts. I really have no time for the opinions.

For students who had this perspective on education, participation in class discussions was not about learning something new, but about expressing what you already did know; and more often than not, they felt like they did not know enough to speak up. Julia (very liberal, “sometimes”) talked about how she just did not know enough about diversity to speak up when those issues came up in class:

Since I was from a small town, I didn't have a lot of experience with that. And so I didn't necessarily know what my opinion was fully. I mean, I wouldn't want to share something that I didn't fully feel confident that I could defend, if that makes sense. And I've felt that way in political classes as well when I was ... I haven't taken any in high school. Not in high school. I haven't taken any in college, but in high school I took a class where we talked about politics and I just didn't feel like I had enough information to defend one way or the other.

Dana (somewhat conservative, “often”) similarly discussed how she felt like she was just expected to know things already, and that everyone else already seemed to. Like Julia, she was often concerned that if she did speak up, she wouldn't know enough to defend her opinion if others argued with her. She explained, “I feel like I just shouldn't say anything because they can come back with something and I have no idea what it is.”

Where Do We Go from Here?

So what does this all mean for how we understand students' decisions about speaking up in the classroom? First, my findings point to a critical disconnect between how students answer survey questions and their actual behavior and experiences. Students like Sarah (very liberal, “never”) who respond that they “never” hold back their opinions in class because they are concerned about how others will react do, in fact, do this. On the other end of the political spectrum, many students are afraid to speak up because they have heard that others may react negatively, but they themselves have never experienced this. Yes, some students do have

negative experiences with how professors or other students have responded to their opinions in class discussions, but these examples are far fewer than the examples of students who hold back because they are constantly hearing that it is dangerous to speak up. Conservative students were most often the ones talking about how they chose not to speak up in class because of things they saw on social media or heard from other students, but liberal students had some of these experiences, too.

This has important implications for how we interpret and talk about survey data about students' attitudes towards their own classroom speech. Students may be answering these questions in a way that reflects a broader cultural and political narrative, rather than in a way that reflects their own experiences. It may also be that using these survey results to support a general narrative about "self-censorship" on campus actually could be making the problem worse; the more students hear that other students feel that they cannot speak up on campus, the more they will feel that they cannot do so either. Rather than helping us solve a problem, the way these surveys are interpreted by the media, policy makers, the general public, and sometimes even the survey authors themselves may be contributing to the problem.

Second, it is clear from my findings that not all students see the benefit of engaging in these challenging classroom discussions, despite the fact that many free speech advocates assume that sharing one's opinion in class is crucial to students' educational experiences. The students I interviewed generally came to college from high schools where they did not learn about controversial political issues, and if they did discuss them with teachers and classmates, generally one side of the issue was dominant. These high school experiences shape how students view learning and how they should, and should not, engage in classroom discussions. Those who are looking to promote more discussion of ideologically diverse viewpoints in college classrooms need to understand that this is not something that students come to college necessarily expecting or being prepared for. More should be done at both the P-12 and higher education levels to help students engage with controversial issues, and in doing so, show students the educational benefit of this type of engagement. Importantly, legislation banning

the discussion of controversial ideas in public schools is the opposite of what we should be doing to promote more engagement with diverse perspectives on college campuses.

Even if we do prepare students for difficult conversations before and during college, however, many students will continue to be uninterested. Scholars and organizations who continue to conduct surveys about students' attitudes towards free speech issues should keep this in mind when interpreting students' responses to survey items about whether or not they feel comfortable sharing their opinions in class discussions.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, my findings point to the need to understand students' approaches to classroom speech developmentally. The way they understand knowledge and learning (cognitive development), their sense of self and their personal and social identities (intrapersonal development), and the way they navigate their relationships with others (interpersonal development) are all implicated in how they navigate the what, where, when, how, and to whom of speaking up in class. Importantly, understanding this as a developmental phenomenon helps us to realize that students are not static; they can change over time, developing more complex ways of understanding these issues. Julia (very liberal, "sometimes") described her own development over time when discussing how she was more comfortable speaking up now than she had been in the past:

Since coming to college, I definitely, especially with this last election, I'm just thinking politically now, I guess. I felt a lot more open to talk to people about what I believed and why because I had, I felt, done a lot more research. Probably not enough, but I had done as much as I could and I felt like I had formulated my opinion based on my experiences and the things that I believed. And so I was willing to share those things, but I wasn't afraid of what other people would think of me because of it, which maybe just comes with getting older, but I felt definitely more comfortable where I'm at now for sure.

Rather than defining students by their answers to a single or very small set of survey questions at a single point in time, we should strive to understand how students develop the capacity to engage in challenging, potentially high-stakes classroom discussions over time. Cross-sectional

surveys can give us a glimpse of what students are thinking, but it is a very small piece of the puzzle. The existing body of research on the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development of college students can be of great use to those looking to promote more speech in the classroom and on campus more broadly.

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Who's Afraid of Safe Spaces?

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A few years ago, as my institution struggled with issues of race and inclusion, I suggested to a colleague that we invite Harvard psychologist Jim Sidanius to talk with our faculty and students. Like many other schools, we sponsor affinity groups for racial and sexual minorities on the theory that they need separate “safe spaces” to address their particular challenges and grievances. But Sidanius’ scholarship suggests that these sorts of interventions might be counterproductive, because they reinforce the same feelings that they are designed to alleviate: When you join an affinity group, you become more likely to perceive discrimination against that same group.¹ So why not invite Sidanius down, let him have his say, and then ask an advocate for affinity groups — say, Micere Keels or Matthew Guttril — to respond?²

“No,” my colleague replied. “I don’t think our students would feel safe.”

That speaks volumes about the lack of real debate over safe spaces at our colleges and universities, which have doubled down on the concept since the election of Donald Trump in 2016. I get that. After all, Trump ran a campaign that that was replete with racist and sexist imagery: Mexicans were rapists, Muslims were terrorists, and women had blood coming from wherever. I’m not a member of any of the groups that he targeted, but I fully understand why they would want places on campus where they could discuss their predicament without fear of judgment, ridicule, or harassment.

What I cannot understand — and what I cannot accept — is the refusal of our institutions to sponsor ongoing discussion *about* safe spaces. Almost all of the criticism of the concept has come from outside of the university, mainly from the right-wing outrage machine of Fox and its various friends: Campus Reform, Turning Point USA, and so on. Silly liberal snowflake, seeking protection from anything you don’t like! Go back to your teddy bear or your mommy, who

spoiled you so much that you can't handle adult contention and controversy! In the face of that mockery, it's again understandable that our colleges and universities would circle the wagons: Of course we need safe spaces, if only to protect ourselves from ridiculous caricatures in conservative media. But that response does more to confirm the caricature than it does to rebut it. And, most of all, it prevents us from engaging in our own careful and mutually respectful discussion about safe spaces.

What would that discussion look like? It would need to start with a definition of the term, so we knew what we were talking about. Is a safe space an actual physical place — like a multicultural, LGBTQ, or women's center — to which specific groups of students can retire to seek strength and succor? Or is it more like a state of mind, a campus-wide set of principles or practices designed to make everyone "feel" safe? Second, each side of the safe-space debate would have to acknowledge the essential truths of the other one, which is the *sine qua non* of dialogue itself. Critics of the concept would admit that it reflects a deep sense of alienation and estrangement among our minority students, who have often failed to find a real home — or, they would say, a safe space — at our institutions of higher education. And advocates of the idea would acknowledge that it has sometimes served to inhibit critical thought and inquiry, because it places certain claims — including, of course, safe spaces themselves — beyond debate. The biggest danger to our academic community doesn't come from right-wing trolls, who will continue to stoke fear and anger no matter what we do. It's that our own fear and anger will prevent us from talking to each other.

* * *

Campus politics are chock-full of buzzwords, but most of them have more identifiable origins than safe spaces do. "Microaggressions" were coined in 1970 by an African-American psychologist at Harvard, to connote small and unintended slights that took a cumulative toll on their victims; "trigger warnings" began in the feminist blogosphere in the 1990s, to warn viewers about sexually violent content.³ The genealogy of safe spaces is less clear. Some observers trace the idea to sociologist Kurt Lewin, who fled Nazism in the 1930s and founded

the National Training Laboratories shortly after World War Two. His clients were corporations and other organizations that were trying to improve worker performance and satisfaction. None of that could happen, Lewin said, unless workers felt free to express their ideas and concerns without fear of judgment or retribution. So the NTL sponsored “T-Groups” (shorthand for Training Groups) and later developed “sensitivity trainings,” all aimed at promoting honest dialogue and exchange in — yes — a safe environment.⁴

Others date safe spaces to the social liberation movements of the 1960s, especially campaigns for women’s and LGBTQ rights. Feminists created consciousness-raising groups — sometimes women-only, sometimes mixed — where participants were encouraged to share ideas and experiences surrounding formerly tabooed or suppressed topics: sex at home, sexism at work, and sexual assault everywhere. Harassed and ostracized by American society, LGBTQ activists were more likely to seek safe spaces in physical locations — especially gay and lesbian bars — where people could “be themselves.” In the early 1990s, universities began to sponsor “Safe Zone” workshops where faculty learned to support LGBT students; professors who had participated in those programs affixed rainbow stickers to their doors, signaling that their offices were Safe Zones as well. Whether describing a particular location or a broader social practice, safe spaces aimed to provide minority and stigmatized groups with new ways to communicate about their longstanding struggles and dilemmas.⁵

By the middle of the decade, however, safe spaces started to assume a different and more expansive meaning. The first scholar to take note of the trend was Robert Boostrom, an education professor at the University of Southern Indiana, whose 1998 article worried that “safe space” was transmuting from a specific place or practice into an all-encompassing metaphor. Although the term wasn’t yet an indexed entry in scholarly books and journals, Boostrom noted, it had already become a “surprisingly popular phrase” among educators. At the 1996 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boostrom attended four different sessions that referred to safe spaces. But they used the term to connote an atmosphere that all students needed, regardless of background or identity; it was both a symbol and an antidote for broad-scale social discontent, imagining the world as full of dangers

and the classroom as a refuge from them. “Why do some (prominent) educators believe that ordinary children in ordinary classrooms have a great need for this sort of ‘safe space’?” Boostrom asked, bracketing his skepticism with quotation marks. “In the case of an abused child or a child with Tourette’s syndrome, the need for (and nature of) safety is obvious. The need for safety from drug-related shootings or gangs of rapists is also obvious. The school should be a safe place. But what lies behind the concern for a figurative, psychically safe space?”⁶

Boostrom’s answer focused upon “stress,” which had become a catch-all phrase to embody the ills of modernity. Drawing upon the work of cultural anthropologist Richard Shweder, Boostrom noted that stress captured the “cosmic uneasiness” of our moment but remained “exquisitely vague and elusive.” Enter safe spaces, which provided the necessary balm to soothe our collective sense of anxiety and discomfort. Where the world was competitive, classrooms would be consensual; where it was judgmental, they would be accepting, and where it was scary, they would be safe. But as Boostrom warned, that maneuver sacrificed critical thinking and reflection — the traditional goals of liberal education — for a vacuous sense of comfort and security. “Being interrogated by Socrates would evoke many feelings, but would a feeling of safety be among them?” he asked. “When everyone’s voice is accepted, and no one’s voice can be criticized, then no one can grow.” Taken to its illogical conclusion, Boostrom wrote, the safe-space concept “turns sympathy into sentimentality, open-mindedness into empty-headedness.” He concluded with a call to attend more closely to our choice of words: loose metaphors might not sink ships, but they can certainly muddle our intellectual waters. “Perhaps we need a different sort of metaphor—the classroom as agora or the classroom as congress,” Boostrom suggested. “Perhaps we simply need to pay attention to to the metaphors that we use.”⁷

But the genie was already out of the bottle, to mix metaphors still further, and there was no easy way to put it back in. In the ensuing two decades, minority groups seized upon safe spaces as both a description of their situation and a remedy for their ills. Some people continued to use the term to describe specific locations where minorities could congregate and receive assistance. Often in the same breath, however, they also demanded that the entire campus be

converted into a safe space protecting everyone from fear, hate, and anxiety. For a recent example of this “concept creep” (as psychologist Nick Haslam calls it), consider a 2018 editorial defending safe spaces published by *The Mass Media*, the student newspaper of the University of Massachusetts-Boston. The editorial starts with a physical definition restricted to certain stigmatized populations, consistent with the concept’s original meaning. “[T]hese areas allow those students particularly vulnerable to hate speech and discrimination a place in which they can recuperate after being exposed to such vulgarity,” it declares. But then the editorial moves quickly to a much broader conception, demanding safety in all places on campus. Foreseeing objections, it notes that “there are those who say that they favor isolated safe spaces, but are affronted by the equally common practice of college campuses establishing the campus itself as one great safe space, in which the same regulations are placed.” But the logic of a specific safe space leads to a more generalized one, the editorial argued: If students are to be safe somewhere, surely they must be safe everywhere. The campus should “monitor” campus communications so that “people of all social minorities are able to express their opinions without being verbally accosted by slurs aimed to shut down this person,” the editorial argues. We must protect these students from the “worst ideas” of our society, it concludes, including “eugenics, homosexual degeneracy, female inferiority, and white nationalism.”⁸

But these terms are also subject to concept creep, of course, and easily extended to any topic or symbol that a listener finds distasteful or harmful. At Occidental College in 2016, for example, the student Coalition for Diversity and Equity denounced a campus 9/11 memorial featuring small flags for each victim of the Sept. 11 attacks. The reason? The flags made students feel unsafe. “On a campus that proclaims itself time and again to be diverse, equitable, and safe for all of its students, the display of American flags covering the entire academic quad disproves that proclamation,” the coalition declared. “As students of color, this symbol of the American flag is particularly triggering for many different reasons. For us, this flag is a symbol of institutionalized violence (genocide, rape, slavery, colonialism, etc.) against people of color, domestically as well as globally.” Here, again, the students were not simply asking for particular spaces that protected certain groups. They were demanding that the entire campus be purged of ideas and symbols that made them feel unsafe.⁹

This “safe space creep” — as Haslam might call it — has become a centerpiece of the liberal critique of the concept, which typically goes like this: it’s fine to demand safety for thought, but you can’t expect safety from it.¹⁰ That’s a more nuanced take than you usually hear from conservatives, who are more likely to condemn safe spaces outright.¹¹ Liberals often acknowledge the need for protected minority-themed spaces, but balk at extending similar protections across the entire campus. “Ones you designate some spaces as safe, you imply that the rest are unsafe,” journalist Judith Shulevitz warned, in a much-quoted 2015 New York Times article. “It follows that they should be made safer.” The following year, liberal icon Salman Rushdie made a similar point during an address at the University of Virginia. “We don’t go to college to be told what you already know. You go to college to be confronted with ideas,” Rushdie declared, as the audience applauded. “And one or two of them might scare you. But that’s the point. And if you don’t want that to happen to you, maybe you should not be at a university.” He also warned that campus-wide speech restrictions designed to protect certain groups would eventually be deployed against them. “It’s a very dangerous path for people to take to use censorship as a way of defending minorities, because it will backfire. It always has,” Rushdie said. “I think we have to develop thicker skins.”¹²

In subsequent remarks, Rushdie said the threat to open discussion and exchange on campus is “somewhat exaggerated”; as a visiting professor at several institutions and an invited speaker at dozens of others, he hadn’t encountered a “single student” who “demanded safe spaces or trigger warnings” against dangerous or hateful ideas.¹³ Perhaps that reflects the selection bias of the students drawn to his classes and speeches, who are unlikely to support campus-wide restrictions on speech in the name of safety. But many students — perhaps, most students — do. In a nationwide survey in 2015-2016, 71 percent of incoming freshmen agreed that “colleges should prohibit racist/sexist speech on campus”; and in a 2017 poll, most chillingly, one-in-five undergraduates said it would be acceptable to use violence to silence a speaker who makes “offensive and hurtful statements.” On the idea of safe spaces, meanwhile, students are split straight down the middle. Asked if they agreed with colleges establishing such spaces, 36 percent of students in a 2017 survey chose, “Yes, they are absolutely necessary for students”; 37 percent selected, “No, they are completely out of touch with reality”; and 25 percent said

they were “indifferent” about the topic.¹⁴ The poll didn’t specify if it meant particular safe spaces or the more generalized idea of a safe campus, so we can’t know how respondents felt about either. One thing is eminently clear, however: Safe spaces are controversial, not just outside the college gates but also inside of them.

Yet you wouldn’t know that from walking around our campuses, which — as my colleague correctly surmised — are not a safe space for a discussion of safe spaces. Critics of the concept often bite their tongues, out of fear of being labelled racially insensitive; as if to prove them right, advocates suggest that opponents of safe spaces don’t really want racial minorities on campus at all. In a recent book, sociologist Micere Keels describes these settings as “counterspaces” to avoid the allegedly racist backlash that “safe spaces” have generated. “The term ‘safe spaces’ has been co-opted by commentators who appear hostile to the presence, let alone success, of minority students,” Keels told a journalist in 2020. Whatever we call them, Keels said, such spaces — including cultural resource centers and minority-focused programs of study — generate “positive identity formation” among stigmatized groups; it follows that anyone questioning the spaces harbors negative feelings about those same groups.¹⁵

That’s been the standard argument used to shut down dialogue about safe spaces, which are widely seen as “sacred” — in the words of liberal critic Frank Furedi — and therefore beyond debate. Even satire has been silenced, always a sure sign that something holy is being transgressed. In 2015, the student government at the University of California-San Diego defunded the humor magazine The Koala—“The Worst in Collegiate Journalism Since 1982,” its masthead declares — after it ran a story about an “all new, state-of-the-art Dangerous Space” on campus. “Safe spaces at UCSD are commonplace, and threaten individuals who do not like feeling safe,” the column jibed. “The logical next step has been taken by the university in creating a place to fully support all UCSD students, continuing the university’s theme of inclusion and equality.” The magazine sued on First Amendment grounds and eventually prevailed, winning back its funding, but the message was clear: If critics know what’s good for them, they should leave safe spaces alone. Even a screening of “Can We Take a Joke,” a movie featuring comedians who mocked safe spaces, was interrupted by protesters at Lawrence

University in 2017. Citing concerns about “the well-being of the campus at large,” the student government later denied official recognition to the campus group (poignantly named Students for Free Thought) that had sponsored the screening. Can we take a joke? Not about safe spaces, apparently.¹⁶

Nor, it seems, can we have a serious public discussion about them. At the University of Kansas, a 2016 debate over safe spaces sponsored by the Young Americans for Freedom — a conservative student group — was shut down by protesters who flatly declared that there was nothing to debate. “It’s not a question. It’s not for you to say,” said one demonstrator, who identified themselves as transgender. “Safe spaces are necessary because the institution that we’re at is not a safe space . . . We have to carve out places and fight for places that we feel safe because not only will we get harassed, we’ll be murdered.” A second transgender protester said they didn’t “feel comfortable” in classrooms where they were “supposed to speak . . . as a queer person [for] all queer people.” Their only refuge were safe spaces, so an event designed to debate such spaces effectively questioned the protester’s right to exist. “This shows you that there is a problem with this institution,” the second protester said. “Students are not being taught that they are supposed to create safe spaces.”¹⁷ At one level, to be sure, the protester was correct: some students weren’t on board with safe spaces. But just as surely, there is a problem with any institution that can’t debate a contested question in a fair and open manner. The question is how we might do so.

* * *

The first step is for critics of safe spaces to acknowledge an obvious and deeply troubling fact: for large numbers of minority students, our colleges and universities remain hostile and alienating environments. “Many black and minority students don’t feel welcome and included on predominantly white campuses,” Inside Higher Ed reporter Scott Jaschik summarized, in the wake of the protests that enveloped campuses in 2015. The protests included an angry and highly publicized exchange at Yale University, where several African-Americans confronted a white administrator whose wife had sent out an email about Halloween costumes that the

students deemed racially insensitive. “It is your job to create a place of comfort and home for the students,” one student screamed. “It is not about creating an intellectual space! It is not! Do you understand that? It’s about creating a home here!” Most media accounts of the imbroglio cast it as a contest between racial diversity and open exchange, reporting that the students charged Yale officials with “caring more about free speech than safe spaces,” to quote one headline. But many of these reports downplayed or ignored the real concerns of minority students, who simply did not feel at home at majority-white institutions. African-Americans, especially, complained that they were often stereotyped as dangerous criminals, dumb jocks, or affirmative-action recipients who weren’t able enough to get into college on their own smarts. Others bridled under the burden of “onlyness,” to quote education scholar Shaun Harper: as one of the few members of their racial group in their classrooms and dormitories, they were either ignored by the majority or asked to “represent” their entire group.¹⁸

That’s why minority students need safe spaces where they can find respite from “daily forms of racial stress,” as Harper told a Congressional committee in 2018. Similar sentiments suffuse accounts by minority students, who consistently report feelings of anger, anxiety, and discomfort. Do my peers respect me? Will I succeed? Should I be here at all? On this sea of doubt and fear, students say, separate safe spaces provide a harbor of security and friendship. “This isn’t about me leaving the room to crawl into a little space and cry about my hurt feelings,” an LGBTQ student at Appalachian State University explained, rebutting a well-worn cliché about safe spaces. “It’s about creating an atmosphere where we can express opinions freely without being harassed or judged.” The most common forms of safe spaces are special cultural centers, which have mushroomed across American campuses over the past two decades. But minority-themed courses can play the same role, as a Black student at Washington University in St. Louis wrote upon taking their first African-American studies class. “When I entered the room it was brimming with energy and, quite frankly, Blackness,” the student wrote. “I had never seen so many people who looked like me in a class before.” Surrounded by other African-Americans, the student “felt seen” rather than stereotyped. “No one was going to ask me to be the sole voice for my race,” the student wrote, “and I felt that I could discuss my experiences as a Black person in the United States in a classroom of people

who understood.” True, the student acknowledged, life after college might not provide similarly safe spaces. But that was all the more reason to establish — and experience — them now. “College is also a time where students learn to become their most authentic selves,” the student concluded, “and in order to do that, marginalized students . . . need spaces where they can feel like they are part of the majority at a university that so often makes them feel like a minority.”¹⁹

All of these sentiments are part and parcel of the minority experience on our campuses. Nobody can — or should — deny that. But it should also be permissible to inquire whether safe spaces might exacerbate rather than alleviate minority dissatisfaction, as Jim Sidanius asked in his 2008 study of 2,000 undergraduates at the University of California-Los Angeles. Sidanius found that the best predictor of positive attitudes towards different racial and ethnic groups was exposure to them: For example, students who were assigned roommates of a different background were more likely to demonstrate favorable views towards other groups. On the other hand, students who interacted primarily with members of their own group more often exhibited bias towards others and perceived discrimination against themselves. That finding held constant for whites as well as for minorities, Sidanius wrote: Once you joined a majority-white fraternity, for instance, you became less accepting of other racial groups and more likely to think that whites were getting the short end of the stick. In general, he concluded, universities should devote less energy to sponsoring groups that separated people by race and more effort to creating spaces that brought them together.²⁰

None of this negates minority students’ perceptions or experiences, in any way, nor does it mean that colleges should not establish separate spaces for them. But it does suggest that we need a more expansive dialogue about these spaces, which will never happen if we assume that any criticism of them is motivated by bigotry and cynicism. That assumption reflects extraordinary cynicism in its own right, ignoring good-faith objections by Sidanius — who is himself African-American — and other people of color. In a 2018 interview with his campus newspaper, for example, retired University of Oklahoma professor George Henderson decried the segregating effects of safe spaces. “I see people talking about their safe space, and ‘safe

space' is a code word for 'people just like us,'" noted Henderson, founder of the university's Human Relations Department as well as the first Black dean on the campus. When he and other African-Americans came to Oklahoma in the 1960s, Henderson recalled, their goal was to interact with people unlike themselves; if you wanted a segregated environment, you went to a historically Black college or university. In recent years, however, even ostensibly "integrated" schools had divided into separate archipelagos. "There's little crossover between communities," Henderson observed. "In the 60's, we were tearing the walls down. I fear now . . . there's a growing number of individuals who want to rebuild those walls bigger and better." Indeed, advocates for safe spaces — who typically reviled President Trump — often echoed Trump's rhetoric of fear and exclusion surrounding immigrants and borders, Henderson pointedly observed. "Some students find [Trump's] wall reprehensible and undemocratic," he concluded, "but they don't find the segregation they are perpetuating in our universities reprehensible and undemocratic."²¹

Henderson's remarks reflect a long-standing debate among African-Americans over racial integration, which always been a contested — and complicated — ideal. What's remarkable is how rarely one hears his perspective expressed on college campuses today, where safe spaces have indeed become a kind of sacred space: The entire community gives them ritual obeisance, which blocks a full discussion and analysis of them. So Smith College students were shocked when African-American civil rights heroine Ruby Bridges questioned the concept during a sold-out speech in 2018. After recounting her struggles to desegregate schools in New Orleans as a six-year-old girl, Bridges was asked what she thought about minority groups creating their own spaces on campus. "Hearing my message today, how do you think I might feel about that?" Bridges replied. "It's time that you find common ground. Try a little harder." As best we can tell, her appeal fell on deaf ears. Later that summer, when a Black student was allegedly harassed by a campus police officer, the student circulated a letter demanding "affinity housing" — that is, separate dormitories for minorities — at Smith. Dutifully, a local newspaper reminded readers that Bridges had expressed reservations about such practices during her visit. Nevertheless, all of the students it interviewed favored separate facilities for minorities. "The supposed 'integrated housing' system currently on campus forces [people of color] into unsafe spaces,"

the student group Affinity Housing at Smith College declared. “It does nothing to uphold principles of equity or justice.”²²

Nothing? A true debate about demands of this sort would engage voices like George Henderson and Ruby Bridges, who are mostly drowned out in the all-or-nothing politics of safe spaces. And it would also give a full airing to the student group’s claim that integrated spaces are “unsafe” ones, which raises hard questions of its own. “Unsafe” for whom? How do we know? And what would make them less so? As we have seen, one obvious — and troubling — answer is to cleanse the campus of whatever is making students feel uncomfortable or estranged. Here another important example comes from Smith, which erupted in protest after Wendy Kaminer — an invited speaker and prominent civil libertarian — argued that teachers should use the actual N-word (and not a euphemism) when they teach “Huckleberry Finn” and other texts where it appears. Kaminer’s remarks came on a panel that included Smith president Kathleen McCartney, who subsequently issued an apology for failing to object and thereby causing students and faculty to feel “hurt.” To an astonished Kaminer, meanwhile, the entire imbroglio demonstrated that her Smith critics “can’t distinguish between racist speech and speech about racist speech.” But once you decide that anything that makes people feel bad is bad, that distinction melts away. Who cares about motive or context, when the well-being of a human being is at stake? “If Smith is unsafe for one student, it is unsafe for all students,” the college’s student government association intoned, denouncing Kaminer’s comments. No wonder so many students report that they censor their own speech, especially in class, lest they stand accused of endangering a peer.²³

Here, too, a real dialogue about safe spaces would require each side to make concessions to the other one. Although you’d never know it from reading right-wing websites, events like the Smith N-word controversy — or the shouting down of conservative speakers such as Charles Murray — are rare on American campuses. Nor is there evidence of a widespread plot to purge our institutions of words and ideas that make people feel uncomfortable. The absurd attacks on Kaminer — and the craven apologies by Smith administrators — give fuel to the stereotype of the student snowflake, which was hilariously parodied by a 2015 article in the satirical

magazine *The Onion*: “Parents dedicate new safe space in honor of daughter who felt weird in class once.” (“God forbid any of you, in your years at this institution, are ever confronted with an opinion you do not share,” the student’s father says. “But if you are, you will have a refuge on this campus.”) But it’s equally absurd to imagine our campuses as loony-left day-care centers, where students’ delicate psyches are protected from any idea they don’t like. The day-care image was popularized by Oklahoma Wesleyan University President Everett Piper, whose 2015 open letter on the subject went viral. “Oklahoma Wesleyan is not a ‘safe place,’ but rather, a place to learn: to learn that life isn’t about you, but about others,” Piper wrote, slamming a student who had said he felt “victimized” by a sermon reading. Piper’s screed pinged across conservative social media, prompting more attacks on “narcissists” and “cry-babies” who were supposedly infantilized by their colleges. Most people giving a Facebook thumbs-up to Piper probably didn’t know that his own college handbook barred students from “illicit sexual dancing” and “sneaking out at night,” which arguably echoed the infantilizing atmosphere that Piper was decrying.²⁴

By the same token, however, advocates for safe spaces should admit that — in certain times and places — the concept has indeed been invoked to protect students from ideas they find discomfiting: Witness the anti-flag demonstration at Occidental, for example, or protests at Brown claiming that a campus debate about rape culture — in which one panelist questioned whether that culture was endemic at American colleges — would endanger the safety of students. Brown students even established a special “safe space” that would be available for anyone who found the panelist too upsetting. As if to confirm *The Onion* satire, the space was equipped with coloring books, bubbles, play-dough, calming music, and videos of frolicking puppies. “I was feeling bombarded by a lot of viewpoints that really go against my dearly and closely held beliefs,” said one student, who had initially gone to hear the debate but retreated to the safe space shortly thereafter. That’s a near-perfect indication of a metaphor run amok, implying that students should indeed be shielded from anything they dislike or fear. To be clear, they have every right to denounce the U.S. flag or a speaker on rape culture. But they have no right to be insulated from a symbol or idea simply because it hurts their feelings. Once you enshrine that kind of safety as the standard of permissible activity, you can eliminate anything

that cause uneasiness or discomfort. We should not exaggerate the extent of this impulse on American campuses, which remain much more open and contentious places than safe-space critics imagine. But nor should we turn a blind eye to dangerous potential of the concept, which — as Robert Boostrom warned a quarter-century ago — can also serve to dampen or muzzle that same contentious dialogue.²⁵

Finally, I also hope that we can conduct a full discussion about how the safe-space idea is influencing the broader way our students see the world. In an influential 2015 article that morphed into a best-selling book, Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff worried that “safetyism” (as they called it) was promoting precisely the fear and anxiety that it purported to relieve. Their critique has found its way into the campus press, where students increasingly question how “safe” they should be. One student editorialist at Georgia Highlands College worried that “the notion that everything should be comfortable” would make students less able to confront challenges and obstacles in their lives. “This generation should be able to face the music without retreating into a soundproof coffin,” the student wrote. At Arizona State University, another student journalist suggested that safe spaces for particular groups could “promote exclusivity and fear” and “perpetuate a culture of victimhood.” Her article quoted ASU psychology professor Michelle Shiota, who warned that the safety concept was damaging students’ educational and emotional growth. “My sense is that ‘safe spaces’ in current parlance are defined more as spaces where no one will be made uncomfortable,” Shiota worried. “College is for learning new ideas, engaging with perspectives and beliefs that may be very different from our own.”²⁶ Contrary to the snowflake stereotype, some of our students are clearly ready to engage with different perspectives and beliefs on safe spaces. The real issue is whether our institutions can summon the courage and the wisdom to foster that debate, instead of suppressing it in the name of safety itself.

Postscript: Safe Spaces in the Age of Black Lives Matter and COVID-19

In March of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic led most American universities to suspend their physical operations; a few months later, following the police murder of George Floyd, the entire country was enveloped by mass protests over racism in criminal justice. Then came a spate of violent attacks on Asian-Americans, culminating in the Atlanta spa shootings — and the deaths of six Asian-American women — in March 2021. Predictably, all of these events sparked new demands for minority-focused safe spaces on American campuses. But they also highlighted the ambiguities of the idea and its susceptibility to concept creep, as more and more people demanded that the entire campus become a safe space —which, in turn, rendered it unsafe for a real debate on the issue. If anything, the multiple crises of 2020-21 made safe spaces both more ubiquitous and less controversial. That was good news if you sought safe spaces for certain groups but bad news for people who wanted a full-on discussion of safety at the university: what it meant, and for whom, and why.

With the advent of coronavirus, many invocations of safe spaces focused — appropriately enough — upon physical ones, and how these spaces might be protected from the virus. At Ball State University in Indiana, for example, a food-services official said the school was “creating safe spaces for in-person dining options and frequently disinfecting highly touched and trafficked areas.” In a similar idiom, a librarian at the University of Kentucky assured students that “libraries are still safe spaces despite the darkness of COVID-19”: If patrons wore masks and practiced social distancing, she added, there was no reason for them to stay away. Some students ignored such protocols, of course, spawning massive infections on many campuses. But others insisted that their schools were not making public spaces safe enough. In a digital town hall at the height of the pandemic, dental students at the University of Minnesota complained about “limited safe spaces to study and eat” on campus; in response, the school appointed a committee “to identify safe spaces available for students.” It sought to establish and protect safety in the most literal sense: absence from material danger and harm.²⁷

By contrast, the police killing of George Floyd — an unarmed Black man — on Memorial Day of 2020 triggered a fresh round of demands for spaces that were safe from racism, in all of its insidious forms. Hundreds of universities released statements expressing solidarity with Black

Lives Matter protesters and pledging to “dismantle” racist practices, which in turn brought skeptical replies from minority students: what are you doing to fight racism, they asked, other than making proclamations condemning it? Universities replied by stepping up funding and publicity for minority-focused affinity groups, first for Black students and later — after the Atlanta tragedy — for students of Asian descent. “Safe spaces are a necessity in an environment where the majority clearly outnumbers the minority,” a Black student at Vanderbilt declared. “I would love to believe just as much as the next person that different people can co-exist happily without problems. But that is simply not true.” That was especially the case in the wake of the Floyd murder, which sparked anxiety and exhaustion among African-Americans; all the more reason for all-Black spaces, students said, which helped them feel grounded and safe. “If you don’t have these Black organizations and Black spaces where we make [students] comfortable about who you are, they get imposter syndrome,” an African-American student leader at Indiana University explained. “When you create these spaces, it helps people know who they are, what is for them and what they are for.”²⁸

Likewise, Asian-American students on numerous campuses demanded separate spaces to help them address their fear and anxiety over anti-Asian violence. In an editorial published shortly after the Atlanta shootings, representatives from four Asian student groups at Columbia argued that safe spaces provided a needed respite from racial trauma as well as a conduit to non-Asian “allies” across campus. “We create these spaces with the hopes that Asians on Columbia’s campus feel seen and heard and so those adjacent to our communities might see and hear us,” they proclaimed. “And right now, listen to us as we say we are feeling a lot with simply not enough words to convey it all.” At the University of South Florida, Asian students called on administrators to provide more “safe spaces and resources” for their community. In the wake of the Atlanta shootings, one student noted, anti-Asian racism had become front-page news. But Asian-Americans had been “dealing with it for the past year,” he added, ever since the COVID-19 pandemic began and Asians were blamed for it. “This whole pandemic affects every single student,” a USF undergraduate acknowledged. “But now . . . not only do I not feel safe about the pandemic, but I also don’t feel safe in my own skin.” Although he was from Thailand, a second student added, people on the street hounded him by shouting, “China, China.” He was

also asked to leave a local restaurant, because he was making other patrons feel “uncomfortable.” So, the student concluded, USF should sponsor more spaces where he and other Asians could feel relaxed and — most of all — safe.²⁹

Echoing earlier trends, however, minority students also demanded that the entire university be rendered safe for them. That meant purging campuses not just of physical threats like coronavirus but also from the virus of racism and discrimination, which were frequently linked to COVID-19 itself. At the University of Louisville, where a person distributed an anti-gay pamphlet to students exiting from an LGBTQ Studies class, students and faculty demanded that officials bar him from campus. Published by a Christian organization, the pamphlet likened LGBTQ students and their defenders to a woman sitting in a car on a railroad track with a train approaching; unless someone rescued her, she would perish. University officials at first refused to intervene, noting that the person distributing the leaflet was not armed or threatening violence of any kind. But critics said otherwise, decrying the pamphlet as a form of violence in its own right. “The protection and safety of the students . . . is important to a functioning university that promotes academic discourse in a safe space,” the university’s chapter of Young Democrats declared. “When the academic boundaries of trust and safety are threatened, the university cannot provide a safe space for academic discourse.” The president of a campus LGBTQ organization was even more direct, insisting that the university was harming “the safety and well being of the LGBTQ students and faculty and staff here” by allowing the offending activity. The school reversed course shortly afterwards, barring the pamphleteer from further contact with anyone on campus. For good measure, it also announced that it would station a police officer outside of the class where the leaflet was distributed.³⁰

Here was safe-space concept-creep, updated for the era of Black Lives Matter and COVID-19. In the face of actual violence, it was not enough to provide minority students with designated spaces where they could discuss their fears and worries; the entire institution had to be cleansed of symbolic violence, as well, lest anyone feel “unsafe” or uncomfortable. Even institutional efforts to fight racism could be deemed violent and threatening, if critics found them insufficiently dedicated to the anti-racist cause. At the University of Tennessee, one

professor argued that any non-Black member of its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committee who had failed to reach out to Black colleagues following the George Floyd murder should step down. “Our underrepresented colleagues do not want to entrust their condition on campus to incapable hands any longer,” she wrote. “The involvement of such individuals . . . makes what should be a trusted safe space on campus an unsafe and triggering one instead.” Indeed, the professor added, no real progress could occur so long as these miscreants remained. “We must make room for the right individuals to initiate and execute true equity and anti-racist initiatives,” she urged. Never mind that equally informed and reasonable individuals might have different understandings of “true equity” or — more broadly — of safe spaces. If you were not part of the solution, you were part of the problem. And it was time for you to move on.³¹

In this environment, an open critique of safe spaces was often impossible. At Cornell, one student editorialist poked fun at the concept in a satirical piece linking menu choices at a local restaurant to customers’ astrological signs. People born under Cancer “like to create safe spaces and find comfort in the reliable turkey, avocado, chipotle aioli and mozzarella combo,” she wrote. “On a day when a Cancer is feeling wild, they may add a fruit cup to their order, or perhaps a pump of vanilla syrup in their iced coffee.” In a more serious vein, handfuls of international and multi-racial students argued that race-themed safe spaces made little room for them. “Like America, I am divided,” a Filipina-American at Harvard wrote. “It’s a struggle that children of mixed heritage know all too well—the state of being simultaneously not enough of anything and too much of everything, with the awareness that we can always be denied entrance to either side.” At Harvard, she added, mixed-race students were “feeling lost among affinity groups”; indeed, they were “erased through the pressure to choose a side.” So they often opted out of racial safe spaces altogether, which were anything but safe for people who embraced more than one race.³²

The only direct challenge to the safe-space idea occurred at the University of Dallas, a small (and mostly white) Catholic college, where minority students proposed to create a “racial justice” group in late 2020. It was inspired by a survey conducted of alumni following the

George Floyd murder, which found that roughly a third of Asian and Hispanic graduates and a quarter of Black ones had suffered “discrimination on campus.” So the students proposed the new club as a “safe zone for all cultures,” a “welcome, inclusive community” where people could “learn about the Black experience in America, as well as other minority experiences.” The president of the Graduate Student Association demurred, arguing that the proposed club “concedes an extremely controversial premise—that UD isn’t safe for all students.” Meanwhile, thirteen 13 faculty members signed a statement arguing that the new club would pit students against each other by highlighting their differences instead of their commonalities. “It is essential to our mission at the University of Dallas to recognize every human person as ‘spiritual and physical, rational and free,’ and to avoid as much as possible the categorization of persons by means of reductive, often politically-charged categories like ‘race,’ ‘people of color,’ ‘black,’ ‘white,’ and the like,” the statement argued. “The formation of such a club . . . is likely to polarize our conversations on social justice.” Nonsense, the elected vice-president of the proposed club replied: The group would actually promote unity, by providing a venue for “isolated” minorities to raise their voices and inform others. Meanwhile, critics outside of the school insisted that resistance to the proposed group was obstinate if not flat-out racist. “They’re just trying to find a safe space,” declared Howard psychology professor Ivory Toldson, in support of the minority students. “If you’re listening to someone who from their perspective, their lived experience, they say, ‘I need to feel more safe in my environment,’ you would think the first thing you would do is to really try to understand things from their perspective.” To allay suspicions of the club, its proponents agreed to change its name from Student Leaders for Racial Justice to Student Leaders for Racial Solidarity; most notably, they also removed the term “safe space” from its constitution.³³

But the group remained committed to safe spaces in principle, if not by name, which clearly meant something different to different people. And racial minorities were hardly united in support of the concept, despite media coverage that consistently imagined safe spaces as something that minorities demanded and white people denounced. The issue was not whether members of different races could freely decide to associate with each other; That was certainly their right, as observers on every side acknowledged. Instead, it was whether our universities

should sponsor and promote such groups on the premise that members needed protection from a hostile environment. Asked for his opinion about safe spaces during an appearance at the University of Chicago in 2018, African-American political commentator Van Jones called them a “terrible idea.” Yes, Jones noted, everyone should be protected from physical dangers and harm. But that was different from being protected from dangerous words and ideas. “I don’t want you to be safe ideologically. I don’t want you to be safe emotionally,” he told students. “I want you to be strong.” In the real world, he added, people experienced offense all the time. So it was time for the students to learn how to address it, instead of asking schools to insulate them from it. “I want you to be offended every single day on this campus,” Jones implored. “I want you to be deeply aggrieved and offended and then learn how to speak back.”³⁴ Jones’ remarks were reprinted in many places across the college press in 2020 and 2021, suggesting more student skepticism of safe spaces than most media accounts allow. The enduring question is whether we can make our campuses safe to debate these spaces, and whether aggrieved and offended people on every side can learn to speak with each other.

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On Building a Culture of Campus Free Expression

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Is there a free speech problem on American college and university campuses? A spate of books on the topic suggests so. As does a recent survey finding that while college students support free speech generally, a majority either believes (incorrectly) that the First Amendment excludes protection for “hate speech” or that, even if it doesn’t, it should.

So there’s an interesting disconnect between First Amendment jurisprudence and the opinions of many college students. What accounts for that? I’ll offer some thoughts on that, but I think it’s not ultimately the right focus of our attention because it assumes that the right state of affairs would be to apply First Amendment principles to the college domain. As a matter of fact, the First Amendment doesn’t apply to private institutions like my own. But the deeper and more interesting issue has to do with the kind of freedom to which any college should aspire and what that freedom is *for*.

The incident that got me thinking about these questions was the shout down of an invited speaker at Middlebury college in the spring of 2017. Having successfully prevented his talk, student protestors descended on the bunker that had been arranged as a secure fallback position for a livestreamed interview conducted by a Middlebury professor. Banging on windows and setting off fire alarms, the mob did its best to disrupt plan B, and then physically harassed the speaker, a senior administrator, and the professor (who was injured in the process) as they tried to leave campus. When the trio made it safely to an off-campus

restaurant, they received word that protestors had been tipped off and were on their way. The trio were literally run out of town.

The “provocation,” as is now well known, was an appearance by Charles Murray, an American Enterprise Institute fellow, author of numerous wonky books, and co-author of one especially controversial one: “The Bell Curve,” that delved into racial differences in IQ scores. Murray hadn’t been invited to discuss the fraught subject of race and intelligence: the topic was his more recent sociological study of why America is “Coming Apart.” The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) had branded Murray as a “white nationalist” and that was enough to trigger a protest. The evening began with what can only be described as a half-hearted reminder of college policies regarding the disruption of invited speakers, a “warning” immediately laughed off by the students. Next, Middlebury President Laurie Patton took the stage, expressed sympathy with Murray’s critics and belabored the obvious: that his appearance did not entail an institutional endorsement of his views. To her credit, Patton urged the crowd to suffer Murray’s talk, to show, in her catchphrase, “rhetorical resilience,” and reminded it that “the very premise of free speech on this campus is that a speaker has a right to be heard.” The protestors responded with disdain (one student had the prescience to prepare a placard which, loosely translated, read “Fornicate Rhetorical Resilience.”) When Murray finally took the podium, the protestors turned their backs on him and chanted a prepared statement, which ran: “This is not a respectful discourse or a debate about free speech. These are not ideas that can be fairly debated. There is no potential for an equal exchange of ideas. ... We see this talk as hate speech.” (See Will DiGravio, Students Protest Lecture By Dr. Charles Murray at Middlebury College, YOUTUBE [Mar. 2, 2017], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6EASuhefel>.)

The indictment illuminates the problem of free speech on campus by revealing different rationales for the shout down. On the one hand, the problem is inequality: Murray’s ideas (whatever they might turn out to be) had an unfair advantage. Murray was the beneficiary of a “platform” that literally and figuratively elevated his ideas above dissenting views, notwithstanding the fact that his argument would be subjected to scrutiny by Allison Stanger, a

political science professor unsympathetic to his perspective and who had come, as she said, “loaded for bear.” On the other hand, Murray’s words would be “hate speech,” i.e., not words expressive of ideas but weapons designed to injure, an intention (or an effect) that provided sufficient warrant to suppress rather than rebut them. Both rationales appeared in a self-exculpatory message from the protest leaders to the Middlebury campus the day: “The administration’s support of a platform for white nationalist speech was an intense act of aggression towards the most marginalized members of the Middlebury community.” Those claims also appeared in a letter from several hundred Middlebury alumni protesting Murray’s appearance before the fact: Murray’s ideas, it said, had been discredited and were thus “not worth engaging;” but, more importantly, his views were a “threat,” “a message to every woman, every person of color, every first-generation student, every poor and working class person, every disabled person and every queer person that not only their acceptance to and presence at Middlebury, but also their safety, their agency, their humanity and even their very right to exist are all up for debate.” In sum: “hate speech” is an act of “violence” and Murray’s ideas are not merely erroneous but pose an existential threat to the most vulnerable members of the college community. No wonder the protestors dismissed in advance “hollow appeals to tolerance and dialogue.” To give Charles Murray a hearing would, in their view, violate Middlebury’s commitment both to “intellectual rigor” and “compassionate inclusivity.”

The response to these extraordinary accusations from outside academia was fierce and dismissive; but to simply mock the protestors as “snowflakes” and re-assert free speech principles is inadequate for two reasons. The students pounding on the administrator’s getaway car at Middlebury were many things—snowflakes they were not. Characterizing their militancy as “hypersensitivity” obscures the fact that their offendedness is more than the effect of I-Gen’s growing up in an atmosphere of overprotection—as psychologist Jonathan Haidt stresses.

I think the Middlebury protestors were deliberately — and therefore, interestingly, to some degree dispassionately — *choosing* to take offense. If the student protestors were triggered, they were already locked and loaded. What transpired at Middlebury was thus a performance of offendedness, and it was informed by a theory. The shout down was defended as an

appropriate response to the alleged “violence” Murray’s speech would have “enacted.” Murray’s views, it was said, attacked the identity of groups already victimized along multiple axes of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class (the list is not exhaustive), groups whose complex oppression can only be grasped “intersectionally.” The protestors’ point was that Charles Murray was *effectively* a white supremacist. To expect conventional evidence or argument for such extreme claims would be to underscore one’s obtuseness, to display the very “misrecognition” or “induced misunderstanding” that, according to the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, renders social domination legitimate even in the eyes of those subject to it.^[i]

My point is: It is not so much that free speech principles have been “forgotten” on left-leaning campuses like Middlebury — as there is an insurrection against them inspired by a complex worldview that emphasizes the social construction of identities while condemning their non-recognition by means of what another theorist calls “epistemic violence.”^[ii] Because non-recognition imposes their lower status, the “safety” of vulnerable identities trumps (I know) protection for the speech or expression that marginalizes or “silences” them. Thus, to regard speech as a method of peaceful social regulation is to “misrecognize” the way in which a hierarchical social system is rigged and how “free speech” can subordinate by “otherizing.”

The source of this perspective is Herbert Marcuse — with whom I spent quality time as an undergraduate — and for whom the task of theory in the unequal society was “to break the concreteness of oppression in order to open the mental space in which this society can be recognized as what it is and does.” The *practice* of liberation, Marcuse said, may well require “apparently undemocratic means” such as the withdrawal of toleration of speech by those who reinforce or benefit from social discrimination; those with “privilege,” as we say today. To reaffirm traditional free speech principles begs the question of their validity. In an oppressive society, Marcuse says, “suppression of the regressive” *is* the path of progress. On some issues, “there is no ‘other side.’”^[iii]

I think it’s this theory that accounts for the otherwise surprising finding that a majority of college students believe the Constitution prohibits hate speech, or that it should.^[iv] Shortly

after the Middlebury protest, the Supreme Court of the United States, as if on cue, doubled down on traditional free speech principles in rejecting the claim of a governmental interest in blocking the expression of offensive ideas. The ruling in *Matal v. Tam* did not deny that “Speech that demeans on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, or any other similar ground is hateful,” nor did it ignore the fact that the costs of toleration are imposed disproportionately on minorities. Nevertheless, Justice Alito wrote for the unanimous Court: “[T]he proudest boast of our free speech jurisprudence is that we protect the freedom to express ‘the thought that we hate.’”^[v]

The interesting thing about the present moment is that when it comes to “hate speech” students do not take pride in tolerating it. To suggest that the “snowflakes” find a thicker skin misses their point that the commitment to “compassionate inclusivity” requires greater “sensitivity,” the taking on of a thinner skin, as it were. Students remain supportive of free speech rights, and they want a “liberal” — i.e., open — campus atmosphere, but they are unpersuaded of the virtue of “tolerating the thought we hate” if it threatens the progress of “diversity and inclusion.” In preferring to err on *that* side, students and college administrators find themselves, for once, on the same page regarding college discipline.

“Diversity” means diversity of *identities* associated especially with race, gender, non-Christian religion, and sexual orientation. And because such identities remain stigmatized by the broader culture, “diversity” is nothing without “inclusion,” without the feeling of being genuinely welcomed rather than grudgingly tolerated.^[vi] The humane intentions of college administrators seem far removed from the severities contemplated by Marcuse, but the belated and mild administrative response to the Middlebury protest is consistent with the logic of “resistance.” The protestors went too far, and their violence was inexcusable, but they were expressing the new moral sense of the progressive campus that takes the concern for what is now called “dignitary safety” as seriously as the freedom of inquiry.

Sigal R. Ben-Porath has coined the term “inclusive freedom” to describe the framework that seeks the broadest protection for campus speech compatible with the assurance that “all

members of the campus community are recognized—and know they are recognized—as members in good standing.” But there lies the rub, for that composite goal, as Ben-Porath herself admits, “becomes harder to realize when instructors, speakers, and students express views that some members of the community see as undermining their basic dignity, casting them as less than full members.”^[vii]

The theory of “inclusive freedom” denies any basic incompatibility between free speech and respect for identity, but the practice of inclusive freedom takes a Marcusean turn. The reasoning is as follows: Free speech is good because it serves democracy, but democracy is never served by anything less than more democracy. And since the progress of democracy is measured by increasing respect for identity, the latter functions as a barometer of freedom itself. It follows that — Ben Porath again — “[a] call for creating an inclusive environment in which all members are respected and where all voices can be heard should be framed and recognized as furthering rather than impeding the realization of a free and open campus.”^[viii]

And thus spoke the Middlebury protestors whose point was precisely that unequal freedom is not genuine freedom. As they framed it, the campus problem was not about striking a balance between equality and liberty interests; *Their* practice of inclusive freedom was predicated on the idea that freedom itself is limited when the vulnerable are “effectively barred” from speaking their minds out of fear of ridicule, “or when they do not feel that they belong or that they are appreciated.”^[ix]

The conviction that “genuine inclusion” will do the work of freedom seems to be both a cause and effect of the metamorphosis in academic culture at Middlebury and elsewhere. The traditional “liberal” academic culture was nurtured by the converse proposition: that genuine freedom would do the work of inclusion.

Bear with me, for this is the most complicated point so far:

What I’m calling the older view of academic culture, was rooted in a sensitivity to the experience of others but for intellectual rather than “compassionate” reasons. Self-expression

is directed at other selves, and even the most vehement speaker implicitly accepts that his speech expresses not mere sounds — which animals can emit — but an *argument*, and even the angriest speaker implicitly acknowledges that his target is a rational agent capable of receiving his message.^[x] This inadvertent tribute that intellectual vice pays to virtue bears interestingly on the fraught matter of criminalizing hate speech. It is the denial of equal social standing that is said to constitute the harm sufficient to exclude hate speech from legal protection.^[xi] The philosopher Bernard Williams once remarked on the curious fact that even those bent on social domination strangely felt the need to invent what they assumed to be a morally relevant reason for the denial of equality. Hence the Nazis cultivated bizarre theories about the inferiority of the Jews as a way of making themselves believe in it.^[xii] All stripes of “supremacists” follow the same pattern, submitting themselves unwittingly and, for their “cause,” disastrously, to the bar of reason — better for them to stick to grunting.

It is faith in the intrinsic discipline of reason that underwrites the old-fashioned liberal confidence that exposure to argument is the best response to pernicious ideas. And here we come to a weakness in the case for punishing speech that wounds the feelings of others.

The principal weakness of the inclusive freedom framework is that there is no arguing with people’s subjective feelings, and *a fortiori* with their *identities*. Granted we should be mindful of the feelings of others and take pains to convey the message that minority students are not only admitted but welcome. Still, we are welcoming them to an *academic* community where their membership or “standing” is independent of their identities. To put it bluntly, as the philosopher Alan Ryan does, in the academic realm we don’t care about who you are “as a person;” we care about what you think. Ryan says, “The point of insulating the classroom from the forum is to allow, indeed, to force, participants to leave their identities as whatever it might be that is most salient to them outside the door.”^[xiii]

Civic life requires the equal protection of the laws and in that way assures respect for different identities, but a crucial assumption of academic life is that our beliefs are separable from our identities, and the trend toward equating negative appraisals of ideas with attacks on

personhood negates it. Blurring the distinction between who or what one is and what one thinks risks putting beliefs beyond the bounds of criticism. For this reason, even while making the case for an actionable harm in hate speech, another philosopher, Jeremy Waldron, cautions against conflating attacks on one's social standing with criticism of one's beliefs: "If I identify my *self* with my beliefs, then criticisms of them will seem like an assault on me."^[xiv] And that, Waldron concludes, demands too much.

What's the upshot of this complicated train of thought? Insofar as academic culture depends on boundaries between the classroom and the forum, and distinctions between ideas and identities, the well-intentioned excesses of diversity and inclusion rhetoric — notable in the Middlebury protestors present also in higher ed speak generally — ought to stop. To valorize students' "lived experiences," or to suggest that their academic work involves the expression of their extra-academic identities, is to send precisely the wrong message about inclusion in the university and their eligibility for it. Of course, men and women, whites and blacks, gays and straights have different experiences and perspectives on the world, but the intersectional insight that identity is always a complex amalgam might remind us that in the final analysis, we can speak only for ourselves.

I've just made some strong claims about the character of an academic community and they are hotly contested today. I'm aware that I've portrayed an ideal and the reality of the past was much messier. The purpose of a college education has changed more than once, and the future of liberal arts education in particular is now up for grabs. Still, I think there is reason to believe that what I have described advisedly as a "liberal" academic culture offers better guidance on free speech and academic freedom than the new, progressive, so-called "woke" culture of "inclusive freedom."

In closing I want to say a word about why the emphasis on restoring First Amendment principles to campus — which some conservative voices demand — is *not* the path to progress. In the old liberal view, academic freedom is the freedom of inquiry, and such investigation is rigorous, disciplined and utterly self-effacing. What the teacher is after is not the student's

“opinion” but his or her critical appraisal of a book or an argument.^[xv] Academic freedom is the fence against illegitimate interference with research and teaching, or with the ability to express one’s ideas and hypotheses; It includes the correlative right to challenge the conclusions of others. But academic speech is highly structured, constrained as much as free. At every juncture, the expression of students and professors is graded, vetted, scrutinized for error; and individuals themselves are promoted, demoted, or excluded along with their more or less successful exposition of ideas.

The university is hardly a “marketplace of ideas” if one means a mall where every intellectual product can be offered for consumption. As Stanley Fish puts it, the academy “is in the business of excluding what it has judged to be unworthy.”^[xvi] Far from being democratic, the academic community is pervasively authoritarian. Whereas government can neither authorize nor de-authorize anyone’s voice, the academic community does it all the time because the advancement of knowledge depends on carefully wrought structures of exclusion. This ethos of exclusion applies even more strenuously to political demands: “A passion for justice is of course a good thing; it’s just not an academic good thing,” says Fish, and the infiltration of causes necessarily subverts academic culture.^[xvii] In an acerbic flourish, Fish admonishes progressive students to “save the world on your own time.” He is equally caustic in dismissing affirmative action for “conservative” viewpoints on grounds of intellectual pluralism, despite their well-documented underrepresentation in academia. Equal representation, Fish retorts, is a political, not an academic, principle: “The business of the academy is to sort the wheat from the chaff and discard, not represent, points of view it judges unworthy; it does not give points of view a place at the table simply because someone out there is asserting them.”^[xviii]

This is bracing stuff and I wouldn’t describe the ideal college experience quite so severely. But it serves as a useful reminder that, unlike free speech in the public domain, the justification of academic freedom is the preservation of the authority of communities of inquiry, and that authority in turn presupposes the possibility of disinterested scholarship. Contrary to the rhetoric of admissions brochures, good professors are dispassionate about their subject, skeptical of the “fierce urgency of now” invoked on behalf of the “socially relevant” curriculum.

Self-preservation requires that they find a way to be “relatable,” and good professors doubtless naturally are; but their charm is, or ought to be, that their education of “the whole person” appeals first and last to the student’s head.

References

- [i] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of A Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
- [ii] The seminal argument is Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
- [iii] Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance” in Robert Paul Wolff et. al., *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 81-2, 100, 106, 120.
- [iv] <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/free-expression-on-campus-what-college-students-think-about-first-amendment-issues>
- [v] Justice Kennedy’s separate opinion added the prudent reminder that “A law that can be directed against speech found offensive to some portion of the public can be turned against minority and dissenting views to the detriment of all.”
- [vi] Diversity and inclusion consultants like to stress the distinction between being involved to a party and being asked to dance. “Equity” has recently been added as the third component of a unified egalitarian imperative, in acknowledgment of the invisible barriers to equal opportunity said to operate behind the veil of equal treatment.
- [vii] Sigal R. Ben-Porath, *Free Speech on Campus* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 56- 57.
- [viii] *Ibid.*, 37.
- [ix] *Ibid.*, 62.
- [x] I rely here on Harvey Mansfield’s argument in “The Value of Speech,” *National Affairs* Vol 46, November 2018.
- [xi] See Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- [xii] Bernard Williams, “The Idea of Equality,” in *Problems of The Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

[xiii] Alan Ryan, "Academic Freedom and the 'Truth Function'," in Cheryl Hudson and Joanna Williams eds., and *Why Academic Freedom Matters* (Civitas, 2016), 63.

[xiv] Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, 135. Italics in the original.

[xv] This is a point stressed in Alan Ryan, "Free Inquiry: Easy Times Can Be Difficult Too," *Social Research* 76:3, Fall 2009.

[xvi] Stanley Fish, *Versions of Academic Freedom Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 148.

[xvii] *Ibid.*, 17.

[xviii] *Ibid.*, 72.