

INQUIRING MINDS... SEPTEMBER 4, 2015
MODERATOR... HOWARD PACHMAN

TOPIC.... CAMPUS SPEECH: HANDLE WITH CARE

David Brooks writes: "Today's campus activists are not only going after actual acts of discrimination – which is admirable. They are also going after incorrect thought – impiety and blasphemy." Inquiring Minds takes a look at this issue through two articles and asks you to think about the following questions:

Can words really be forms of violence that must be controlled?

How are students affected if the calculus has changed from political correctness to protection from emotional trauma?

Does the concept of a "safe space" ever have any value?

Should we be able to distinguish between, for example, racism and a discussion of racism?

To what extent are civil rights statutes and the threat of litigation contributing to the problem?

To what extent are scholarship and teaching endangered.

The Campus Crusaders

JUNE 2, 2015



Every generation has an opportunity to change the world. Right now, college campuses around the country are home to a moral movement that seeks to reverse centuries of historic wrongs.

This movement is led by students forced to live with the legacy of sexism, with the threat, and sometimes the experience, of sexual assault. It is led by students whose lives have been marred by racism and bigotry. It is led by people who want to secure equal rights for gays, lesbians and other historically marginalized group

These students are driven by noble impulses to do justice and identify oppression. They want to not only crack down on exploitation and discrimination, but also eradicate the cultural environment that tolerates these things. They want to police social norms so that hurtful comments are no longer tolerated and so that real bigotry is given no tacit support. Of course, at some level, they are right. Callous statements in the mainstream can lead to hostile behavior on the edge. That's why we don't tolerate Holocaust denial.

But when you witness how this movement is actually being felt on campus, you can't help noticing that it sometimes slides into a form of zealotry. If you read the website of the group FIRE, which defends free speech on campus, if you read Kirsten Powers's book, "The Silencing," if you read Judith Shulevitz's essay "In College and Hiding From Scary Ideas" that was published in The Times in Sunday Review on March 22, you come across tales of professors whose lives are ruined because they made innocent remarks; you see speech codes that inhibit free

expression; you see reputations unfairly scarred by charges of racism and sexism.


The problem is that the campus activists have moral fervor, but don't always have settled philosophies to restrain the fervor of their emotions. Settled philosophies are meant to (but obviously don't always) instill a limiting sense of humility, a deference to the complexity and multifaceted nature of reality. But many of today's activists are forced to rely on a relatively simple social theory.

According to this theory, the dividing lines between good and evil are starkly clear. The essential conflict is between the traumatized purity of the victim and the verbal violence of the oppressor.

According to this theory, the ultimate source of authority is not some hard-to-understand truth. It is everybody's personal feelings. A crime occurs when someone feels a hurt triggered, or when someone feels disagreed with or "unsafe." In the Shulevitz piece, a Brown student retreats from a campus debate to a safe room because she "was feeling bombarded by a lot of viewpoints that really go against" her dearly and closely held beliefs.

Today's campus activists are not only going after actual acts of discrimination — which is admirable. They are also going after incorrect thought — impiety and blasphemy. They are going after people for simply failing to show sufficient deference to and respect for the etiquette they hold dear. They sometimes conflate ideas with actions and regard controversial ideas as forms of violence.

Some of their targets have been deliberately impious. Laura Kipnis is a feminist film professor at Northwestern University who wrote a provocative piece on sexual mores on campus that was published in February. She was hit with two Title IX charges on the grounds, without evidence, that her words might have a "chilling effect" on those who might need to report



Other targets of this crusade had no idea what they were getting into. A student at George Washington wrote an essay on the pre-Nazi history of the swastika. A professor at Brandeis mentioned a historic slur against Hispanics in order to criticize it. The scholar Wendy Kaminer mentioned the N-word at a Smith College alumni event in a clearly nonracist discussion of euphemism and free speech.

All of these people were targeted for purging merely for bringing unacceptable words into the public square. As Powers describes it in "The Silencing," Kaminer was accused of racial violence and hate speech. The university president was pilloried for tolerating an environment that had been made "hostile" and "unsafe."

We're now in a position in which the students and the professors and peers they target are talking past each other. The students feeling others don't understand the trauma they've survived; the professors feeling as though they are victims in a modern Salem witch trial. Everybody walks on egg shells.

There will always be moral fervor on campus. Right now that moral fervor is structured by those who seek the innocent purity of the vulnerable victim. Another and more mature moral fervor would be structured by the classic ideal of the worldly philosopher, by the desire to confront not hide from what you fear, but to engage the complexity of the world, and to know that sometimes the way to wisdom involves hurt feelings, tolerating difference and facing hard truth.

Sheltered Students Go to College, Avoid Education



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By Megan McArdle

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If you've reached that crotchety age I'm at, you may be as mystified as I am by the kids these days -- especially by how they're behaving on campus. I get the naive leftist politics and the wildly irresponsible partying; those things have been staples of student life for hundreds of years. I even understand the drive toward hamfisted censorship of views they don't like. After all, I did my coming-of-age at the University of Pennsylvania during the "spring from hell," when copies of the campus newspaper were stolen to protest perceived bias against minorities, and Eden Jacobowitz was famously brought up on racial harassment charges for screaming "shut up, you water buffalo " out the window at a black sorority that was conducting a rather lively promenade down the walk below his dorm window.

What I don't understand is the tenor of the censorship. When I was in college, people who wanted to censor others were forthrightly moralistic, trying to silence "bad" speech.

Today's students don't couch their demands in the language of morality, but in the jargon of safety. They don't want you to stop teaching books on difficult themes because those books are wrong, but because they're dangerous, and should not be approached without a trigger warning. They don't want to silence speakers because their ideas are evil, but because they represent a clear and present danger to the university community. If the school goes ahead and has the talk anyway, they build safe spaces so that people can cower from the scary speech together.

Are ideas dangerous? Certainly their effects can be. Ideas like "Asbestos sure makes good insulation" and "Bleed patients to balance the humors" racked up quite a number of fatalities. But of course, the ideas themselves didn't kill anyone; that was left to the people who put them into practice. The new language of campus censorship cuts out the middleman and claims that merely hearing wrong, unpleasant or offensive ideas is so dangerous to the mental health of the listener that people need to be protected from the experience.

During the time when people are supposed to be learning to face an often hard world as adults, and going through the often uncomfortable process of building their intellectual foundations, they are demanding to be sheltered from anything that might challenge their beliefs or recall unpleasant facts to their mind. And increasingly, colleges are accommodating them. Everything at colleges is now supposed to be thoroughly sanitized to the point of inoffensiveness -- not only the coursework, but even the comedians who are invited to entertain the students.

The obvious objection to this is that it is not possible to have a community of ideas in which no one is ever offended or upset. By the time you're done excising the Victorian literature that offends feminists, the biology texts that offend young-earth creationists, and the history lessons that offend whichever group was on the losing side, there's not much left of the curriculum. The less obvious, but even more important, objection is raised by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt in this month's Atlantic: It's bad for the students themselves.

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Students demanding that campus life be bowdlerized to preserve their peace of mind seem to believe that the best way to deal with trauma is to avoid any mention of it. But Lukianoff and Haidt argue that this is exactly backward; chronic avoidance breeds terror. The current climate on campus is a recipe for producing fearful adults who are going to have difficulty coping in an adult world. It's as if we were trying to prepare the next generation of American citizens by keeping them in kindergarten until the age of 23.

Why is this happening now? How did colleges manage to guide generations of students through offense and outrage, only to founder at the dawn of the 21st century? Haidt and Lukianoff offer some plausible candidates: the increasingly sheltered lives that middle-class children now live, and expect colleges to sustain. "In a variety of ways," they write, "children born after 1980—the Millennials—got a consistent message from adults: life is dangerous, but adults will do everything in their power to protect you from harm, not just from strangers but from one another as well." Too, partisanship is higher, and angrier, than it was when I was in college. And today's students, who live in a world where social media make it easy to launch crusades, may have stronger tendencies in this direction than my generation. (Once upon a time, an offense had to be outrageous enough for people to go to the trouble of exchanging phone numbers, attending meetings and printing fliers.)

There's also a regulatory component: Under Obama, the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights has broadened the definition for what constitutes offensive speech. Colleges tremble in fear of lawsuits or visits from regulators, and they send legions of administrators forth to head off any threat by appeasing angry students and making new rules.

But here's a candidate Haidt and Lukianoff don't mention: the steady shift toward viewing college as a consumer experience, rather than an institution that is there to shape you toward its own ideal. I don't want to claim that colleges used to be idylls in which the deans never worried about collecting tuition checks; colleges have always worried about attracting enough students. But cultural and economic shifts have pushed students toward

behaving more like consumers in a straight commercial transaction, and less like people who were being inducted into a non-market institution.

Mass education, and the rise of colleges as labor market gatekeepers, have transformed colleges from a place to be imbued with the intangible qualities of character and education that the elite wanted their children to have, and into a place where you go to buy a ticket to a good job. I strongly suspect that the increasing importance of student loans also plays a role, because control over the tuition checks has shifted from parents to students. And students are more worried about whether their experience is unpleasant than are parents, who are most interested in making sure their child is prepared for adulthood.

You see the results most visibly in the lazy rivers and rock-climbing walls and increasingly luxurious dorms that colleges use to compete for students, but such a shift does not limit itself to extraneous amenities. Professors marvel at the way students now shamelessly demand to be given good grades, regardless of their work ethic, but that's exactly what you would expect if the student views themselves as a consumer, and the product as a credential, rather than an education.

So perhaps I shouldn't be surprised to find that students are demanding to be kept sheltered from ideas they don't like -- or that universities have begun to acquiesce to these demands. But if it is not surprising, it is worrying. A university education is supposed to accomplish two things: expose you to a wide variety of ideas and help you navigate through them; and turn you into an adult, which is to say, someone who can cope with people, and ideas, they don't like. If the schools abdicate both functions, then the only remaining function of an education is the credential. But how much will the credential be worth when the education behind it no longer prepares you for the real world?

1. *Jacobowitz, who was born in Israel, maintained that this was not a racial slur, but a translation of the Hebrew word "behema", slang for a thoughtless, rowdy person.*

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2. *Of course professors should be sensitive to people with PTSD. But most students don't have PTSD, and you don't treat the whole class for an individual student's mental health problem. Even if we thought this was a good idea, it's not possible; the list of potential PTSD triggers is nearly infinite.*

3. *Ah, you will say, but of course we don't mean cutting evolution out of the biology textbooks; we only mean to protect a specific list of people. Unfortunately, in a liberal society, it doesn't work that way; any precedent that you establish for the groups you want to protect will inevitably be seized upon and used by groups who want to be protected from you.*

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