

The Coddling of the American Mind

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In the name of emotional well-being, college students are increasingly being protected from words and ideas they don't like. Here's why that's disastrous for education—and mental health.

by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt



Something strange is happening at America's colleges and universities. A movement is arising to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.

Last December, Harvard Law Professor Jeannie Suk wrote in *The New Yorker* about law students asking their professors not to teach rape law—or, in one case, even use the word *violate* (as in “that violates the law”) lest it cause students distress. In February, Laura Kipnis, a professor at Northwestern University, wrote an essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* describing a new campus politics of sexual paranoia—and was then subjected to a long investigation after students who were offended by the article filed Title IX complaints against her.

Microaggressions and Trigger Warnings

Two terms have risen quickly from obscurity into common campus parlance. *Microaggressions* are small actions or word choices that seem on their face to have no malicious intent but are thought of as a kind of violence nonetheless. The term *microaggression* originated in the 1970s and referred to subtle, often unconscious racist affronts. The definition has expanded in recent years to include anything that can be perceived as discriminatory on virtually any basis.

Trigger warnings are alerts that professors are expected to issue if something in

a course might cause a strong emotional response. For example, some students have called for warnings that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* describes racial violence and that F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* portrays misogyny and physical abuse—so that students who have been previously victimized by racism or domestic violence can choose to avoid these works, which they believe might “trigger” a recurrence of past trauma.

Some recent campus actions border on the surreal. In April, at Brandeis University, the Asian-American student association sought to raise awareness of microaggressions against Asians through an exhibit on the steps of an academic hall. The display gave examples of microaggressions such as “Aren't you supposed to be good at math?” and “I'm colorblind—I don't see race.” But a backlash arose among other Asian-American students, who felt that the exhibit it-

The new campus climate of protectiveness is infantilizing.

self was a microaggression. The association removed the display, and its president wrote an email to the entire student body apologizing to anyone who was “triggered or hurt by the content of the microaggressions.”

This new climate is slowly being institutionalized and is affecting what can be said in the classroom, even as a basis for discussion. During the 2014-15 school year, for instance, the deans and department chairs at the 10 University of California system schools were presented by administrators at faculty training sessions with examples of microaggressions. The list of offensive statements included: “America is the land of opportunity” and “I believe the most qualified person should get the job.”

In March, the student government at Ithaca College in upstate New York, went so

far as to propose the creation of an anonymous microaggression-reporting system. Student sponsors envisioned some form of disciplinary action against “oppressors” engaged in belittling speech.

The press has typically described these developments as a resurgence of political correctness. That's partly right, although there are important differences between what's happening now and what happened in the 1980s and '90s. That movement sought to restrict speech (specifically “hate speech” aimed at marginalized groups), but it also challenged the literary, philosophical, and historical canon, seeking to widen it by including more diverse perspectives.

Vindictive Protectiveness

The current movement, by contrast, is largely about *emotional well-being*. More than the last, it presumes an extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche, and therefore elevates the goal of protecting students from psychological harm. The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into “safe spaces” where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable. This new movement seeks to punish anyone who interferes with that aim, even accidentally. You might call this impulse *vindictive protectiveness*. It is creating a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse.

We have been studying this development for a while now, with rising alarm. The dangers that these trends pose to scholarship and to the quality of American universities are significant. But, what are the effects of this new protectiveness on the students themselves? Does it benefit the people it is supposed to help? What exactly are students learning when they spend four years or more in a community that polices unintentional slights, places warning labels on works of classic literature, and in many other ways conveys the sense that words

(Cont., p. 7)

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“The Coddling . . .” cont. from p. 8)

can be forms of violence that require strict control by campus authorities?

There’s a common saying: Don’t teach students *what* to think; teach them *how* to think. The idea goes back at least as far as Socrates. Today, what we call the Socratic method is a way of teaching that fosters critical thinking, in part by encouraging students to question their own unexamined beliefs, as well as the received wisdom of those around them. Such questioning sometimes leads to discomfort, even to anger, on the way to understanding.

But vindictive protectiveness teaches students to think in a very different way. It prepares them poorly for professional life, which often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong.

Moreover, a campus culture devoted to policing speech and punishing speakers is likely to engender patterns of thought that are surprisingly similar to those long identified by cognitive behavioral therapists as causes of depression and anxiety. Nearly all of the campus mental health directors surveyed in 2013 by the American College Counseling Association reported that the number of students with severe psychological problems was rising at their schools.

The Thinking Cure

For millennia, philosophers have understood that we don’t see life as it is; we see a version distorted by our hopes and fears. Cognitive behavioral therapy is a modern embodiment of this ancient wisdom. It is the most extensively studied nonpharmaceutical treatment of mental illness and is used widely to treat depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and addictions.

The goal of cognitive behavioral therapy is to minimize distorted thinking and see the world more accurately. You start by learning the names of the dozen or so most common cognitive distortions (such as overgeneralizing, discounting positives, and emotional reasoning). Each time you notice yourself falling prey to one of these distortions, you name it, describe the facts of the situation, consider alternative interpretations, and then choose an interpretation of events more in line with those facts. Your emotions follow your new interpretation. When people improve their mental health in this way, they become less depressed, anxious, and angry.

The parallel to formal education is clear: Cognitive behavioral therapy teaches good critical thinking skills, the sort that educators have long striven to impart. By almost any definition, critical thinking requires grounding one’s beliefs in evidence rather than in emotion or desire, and learning how to search for and evaluate evidence that might contradict one’s initial hypothesis.

But does campus life today foster critical thinking—or does it coax students to think in more distorted ways?

Higher Ed. and “Emotional Reasoning”

Emotional reasoning dominates many campus debates and discussions today. Because there is a broad ban in academic circles on “blaming the victim,” it is generally considered unacceptable to question the reasonableness (let alone the sincerity) of someone’s emotional state, particularly if those emotions are linked to one’s group identity. The thin argument, “I’m offended,” becomes an unbeatable trump card.

Talking openly about conflicting values is what a diverse but tolerant community must learn to do.

If universities teach students that their emotions can be used as weapons, then they are teaching them a kind of hypersensitivity that will lead them into countless conflicts that will damage their careers and friendships along with their mental health.

Mental Filtering

Mental filtering, another cognitive distortion, focuses on the negative in any situation to the exclusion of the positive. When applied to campus life, mental filtering allows for simple-minded demonization.

Many students and faculty members exhibited this cognitive distortion during 2014’s “disinvitation season.” That’s the time of year when commencement speakers are announced, and when students and professors demand that some of those speakers be disinvited because of things they have said or done. Since 2000, according to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, at least 240 campaigns have been launched at U.S. universities (most since 2009) to prevent public figures from appearing at campus events. If students graduate believing that they can learn nothing from people they dislike or from those with

whom they disagree, we will have done them a great intellectual disservice.

What Can We Do Now?

Attempts to shield students from words, ideas, and people that might cause them emotional discomfort are bad for students. They are also bad for the workplace, which will be mired in unending litigation if student expectations of emotional safety are carried forward. And they are bad for American democracy, which is already paralyzed by worsening partisanship.

Rather than trying to protect students from words and ideas they will inevitably encounter, colleges and universities should:

1. Rethink the skills and values they most want to impart to their incoming students. Teaching students to avoid giving unintentional offense is a worthy goal, especially when the students come from many different cultural backgrounds, but students should also be taught how to live in a world full of potential offenses. Talking openly about conflicting but important values is just the sort of challenging exercise that any diverse but tolerant community must learn to do.

2. Strongly discourage trigger warnings. Colleges should endorse the American Association of University Professors’ report: “The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is infantilizing and anti-intellectual.”

3. Teach incoming students how to practice cognitive behavioral therapy. Given high and rising rates of psychological problems among college students, this simple step would be among the most humane and supportive things a university could do. The cost and time commitment could be kept low; a few group training sessions could be supplemented by websites or apps.

This effort could pay dividends in many ways. For example, a shared vocabulary about reasoning, common distortions, and the appropriate use of evidence to draw conclusions would facilitate critical thinking and real debate. It would also tone down the perpetual state of outrage that seems to engulf some colleges these days, allowing students’ minds to open more widely to new ideas and new people.

Finally, a greater commitment to formal debate on campus—and to assembling a more politically diverse faculty—would also serve the goals of critical thinking and a diverse campus community. ■