

# HANDLING A DIVERSITY OF IDEAS

How safe spaces and trigger warnings might impact you

*by Beth Howard*

**THIS PAST SPRING**, after students at Lewis and Clark College in Oregon invited Jessica Vaughan of the Center for Immigration Studies to debate immigration policy on campus, they learned that the Southern Poverty Law Center designated the center as a hate group. The student committee in charge struggled with whether to let the event go on as planned, but ultimately decided to proceed. As protesters from the community shouted and played sirens to disrupt the debate, students and faculty listened to Vaughan's views and asked tough questions. Samuel Stites, a senior majoring in international affairs and music, doesn't believe the group's research methods "stand up to academic rigor." But he helped plan the event.

No matter one's views on immigration, the Lewis and Clark event stands in stark contrast to happenings on many college campuses these days. In March, when controversial conservative writer Charles Murray was invited to speak at Middlebury College in Vermont, student protesters shouted over his remarks, forcing the event to be moved to a video studio. Afterwards, Murray and the Middlebury faculty member who had moderated a discussion with him were swarmed by protesters, and the professor was hurt in the melee. In February, the University of California at Berkeley canceled an appearance by Milo Yiannopoulos, a former editor at the far-right website Breitbart, after violent protests broke out.

Challenging the expression of unpopular ideas is just one of several related trends recently roiling college campuses. Schools are struggling with such perceived threats to intellectual debate as calls for "trigger warnings" to protect students



from material that might offend or traumatize them and the rise of the “safe space,” which can mean a campuswide culture that discourages disturbing discussions or simply a place where students who are in a minority can congregate and let their guard down. The controversy gives prospective students new dimensions of college life to consider as they choose a school. How much do you value the free exchange of ideas? Can you tolerate living and studying with people whose religious beliefs or political views are diametrically opposed to your own?

“A university really is supposed to be a marketplace of ideas, and those ideas can and should be divergent at times,” argues Shaun R. Harper, a professor of education and executive director of the Race and Equity Center at the University of Southern California. “Universities should be places where ideas are contested and debated. You can’t do

that if you’re not engaging with people who disagree with you.” Adds Geoffrey R. Stone, a law professor at the University of Chicago and a noted First Amendment scholar: “We want to educate our students about not only the value of free expression and debate and courage, but also to civility and mutual respect.”

Instead, at some schools, “many students say they walk on eggshells and are afraid to speak up,” says Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at New York University who has studied the issue. “In seminar classes, no one disagrees anymore. Students are pressuring the university to take sides on the issues of the day. But when the university takes sides, that shuts down discussion and debate.”

In response, Haidt co-founded Heterodox Academy, a nationwide group of about 1,100 professors of all political stripes who call for greater “viewpoint diversity” on



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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN  
STUDENTS TALK TO  
VICE PROVOST LORI BERQUAM  
ABOUT HOLDING A RACISM  
AWARENESS MEETING.



campus. “We believe that the vast majority of high school seniors and their parents, whether they are on the left or the right, believe in free speech and believe that people should be able to challenge each other’s ideas,” he says. The group’s Guide to Colleges ([heterodoxacademy.org/resources/guide-to-colleges](http://heterodoxacademy.org/resources/guide-to-colleges)) evaluates schools based on an institution’s regulations, ratings by outside groups, and news stories about events on campuses. For instance, Johns Hopkins University this summer received an upgraded rating when it announced a \$150 million initiative to “facilitate the restoration of open and inclusive discourse” by conducting research and holding events examining divisive policy issues, among other plans.

While visiting speakers may set off alarms only occasionally, more day-to-day concerns have arisen around the concept of trigger warnings, which let students know when potentially upsetting material is on the syllabus. The idea is that they could excuse themselves from discussions or class assignments that they believe might harm their mental health, such as content related to sexual violence or combat.

Opponents of such policies argue that they encroach on academic freedom and deny students critical knowledge and the opportunity to face uncomfortable ideas and grow from pondering them. The University of Chicago made waves last year when its dean of students told incoming freshmen in a welcome letter not to expect trigger warnings or intellectual safe spaces. (The university does not mandate a formal policy for faculty, allowing them “broad freedom in how they accommodate concerns that students may express, including advising students about difficult material,” according to a university spokesperson.)

### Indeed, many students and teachers say it’s possible to give

students a heads-up without omitting upsetting facts or causing them to walk out. “It’s just a precursor, like when you go to a movie, and you’re about to see a really violent trailer,” says Samantha Brinkley, a junior at SUNY-Purchase majoring in photography and gender studies. “Before they show it, they have a rating, like rated R, because you want to get ready for what you’re about to see.”

“I believe that they are warranted in certain situations,” says Lauren Griffith, a cultural anthropologist at Texas Tech University, “but should not be used as a way of sheltering students from encountering and wrestling with uncomfortable ideas.” Before Griffith shows films on Afro-Caribbean or Siberian religions, for instance, she lets students know

that they will depict animal sacrifice. “No one has actually left the room,” she says, “but several averted their gaze during the films.” Griffith says she doesn’t know whether the warnings have influenced class discussions but students do want to talk about what they’ve seen. “It’s possible my calling attention to it prior to the film made them pay attention to its significance,” she says.

Hasan Jeffries, who teaches African-American history at Ohio State University, takes a similar approach, giving an overview of topics that will be covered during the semester on the first day and offering context. “I will say that there is no way to teach this history without talking about violence that was done to people of color,” he says. “Today, people may call that a trigger warning. I see it as more of ‘Look, this is American history, not Disney history. We’re going to

encounter the hard truths of it.’ It’s how you create a learning environment in which everyone is comfortable so they can learn.”

So far, few institutions appear to mandate trigger warnings or prohibit them, leaving such decisions to the discretion of individual faculty members. Prospective students may want to explore their own values and ask about the policies at a school.

The notion of a college campus as a safe space, and the more prevalent creation of places where students can retreat from the stresses of being in the minority and spend time among like-minded peers, are also the subject of considerable controversy. Such spaces, often at a university’s multicultural center or a dedicated area within a student union, have evolved from the black cultural and women’s centers that are common on campuses.

Some administrators and academics worry that when the safe space idea is carried too far, it might stifle the diversity of viewpoints in conversations and could leave graduates unprepared for situations in the real world where such “bubbles” won’t be available. Celebrating diversity is a good thing, they might argue, but it’s not helpful in the long run for students to become too insular or to avoid dissenting opinions entirely.

Proponents say that having a sense of security can actually encourage minority students who elsewhere feel silenced to engage in debate. “They’re places where students can decompress and access some cultural familiarity and support,” says Harper, who has conducted campus climate surveys of almost 50 colleges and universities. “At every campus we’ve studied, we heard black and Latino students especially talk with us about how they are often, and sometimes always, the only nonwhite person in class.” Ricardo de la Cruz II, a senior English major at the Univer-

Try to get a sense of a school’s culture from current students.





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sity of Wisconsin–Madison, says he “sometimes feels like an alien” on campus as one of just 2 percent of undergrads who are black, and that the Multicultural Student Center has become an important support system.

On the whole, colleges are making myriad efforts to support a diverse range of students. At the University of Tampa, an initiative called Diversity Fellowship hosts events to raise awareness of groups who are often marginalized based on their sexual orientation, gender, religion, race and socio-economic status, among other factors. “We try to make sure the university is educated and at the same time foster a sense of inclusivity,” says student coordinator Caroline Stadler, a senior majoring in public health. Numerous schools – Armstrong State University in Georgia, Concordia College in Minnesota, Kent State University in Ohio, the University of South Carolina, and James Madison University in Virginia, among them – have Safe Zone and Safe Space programs in place that train students, faculty members and administrators to be special allies to LGBTQ and other groups and to provide support to any student who may turn to them.

For prospective students of color and those seeking a diverse and inclusive learning environment, it’s important to try to get a genuine sense of a school’s culture during a visit or by connecting with current or former undergrads.

#### HANGING OUT AT A MULTICULTURAL CENTER AT DAVIDSON COLLEGE



You “have to be willing to talk to alumni of color about the realities of race on the campus and to students of color who are juniors and seniors,” Harper advises.

Harper advises asking about the racial composition of the faculty and the student body as well as where in the curriculum students will learn about other people’s cultural histories. Starting in 2018, the USC Race and Equity Center will set about providing a new data tool called the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates, a survey of students of color, women, LGBT students, people with disabilities, and religious minorities about their experiences. “We will be able to benchmark institutions against each other and highlight those that have exemplary inclusive campus climates,” says Harper.

Prospective students should consider what is most important to them when it comes to finding the right fit and how much shelter and support they think they’ll want. If you’re looking for a pretty conservative or religious environment, say, then you might feel out of place at a large university known for its party atmosphere or at a college where a vast majority of students lean the other way. If trigger warnings and having a safe space are essential to you, consider a place with some sort of track record you can check out. A little reflection and research will go a long way in helping you finding a place where you can thrive. ●

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