Students deserve safe spaces on campus (essay)

Submitted by Matthew Pratt Guterl on August 29, 2016 - 3:00am

I teach at an elite Ivy League university, where, for several years now, debates over free speech, racial justice and diversification have been explosive. Last year was, in a word, rough. Following several high profile police shootings, there were protests and hunger strikes and sit-ins nationally, and our own campus was turned upside down by two incendiary opinion pieces in the student newspaper and a disturbing, physical encounter between a visiting student and the campus police. As an institution, we struggled, worked hard, changed some things right away, and made some big claims and promises about our future.

In just a few days, our students will return to the classrooms. They will expect an engaged faculty and will want new classes addressing contemporary social and political issues. Together, we will be looking to solve problems. At times, too, they will be hoping for some kind genuflection to their humanity, their youth and the dark, merciless world in which we live. In short, they will be looking for exactly the sort of "safe space" that other faculty members at other universities -- like the dean of students at the University of Chicago -- have closed off as merely self-serving "retreats" [1] for the weak-kneed.

I hope that at the end of the day, Chicago's cold, Darwinian approach will be an outlier nationally -- and that students almost everywhere will be received this academic year more graciously, more thoughtfully and more constructively than those who imagine such things. Because, in the end, we will all need each other to do the work that must be done. And that work is not some sort of Thunderdome, in which two ideas do battle until one survives. This is a crucial moment for higher education, and the brisk response from Chicago reveals the stakes clearly. We -- faculty members, students, administrators and our publics -- are actually on the verge of making significantly more comprehensive adjustments to the mission of higher education than were made previously. We should embrace those more dynamic, more revolutionary changes and drive them home.

Thesis

One of the big, challenging reforms is the notion of a "safe space" for our students, a concept that is both old and new and nearly impossible to define. It can mean a single room on a campus, the floor of a building or an entire center or department. It can refer to the presence of trained counselors, the support of friends and allies, or the absence of hurtful material. Our students deserve such spaces on a campus because the absence of such spaces is counter to the very mission of higher education.

In surveying the groundwork, however, not everyone thinks higher education is on the right track, especially when attention turns to race. The dean at the University of Chicago is not alone. Critics dismiss protesting students as spoiled, "self-infantilizing," pampered brats [2], and they imagine that, by responding to their complaints and taking them seriously, universities are abrogating their

mission to foster an unregulated exchange of ideas. A vocal handful of faculty members worry that their free speech -- or, on a lower frequency, their academic freedom -- is under siege. Videos of student's screaming at white faculty members and administrators circulate on right-wing blogs and websites as proof. Some donors, as [3]*The* [3] *New York Times* [3] reports [3], complain that universities are now spending too much money on diversity, leading to a noticeable downward turn in giving this past year.

In this context, "safe space" is too easily parodied – as the *Onion* did, with its headline from July of 2015, "Parents Dedicate Safe Space on Campus in Honor of Daughter Who Felt Weird in Class Once." [4] Too easily parodied -- and too easily undone, as well, as the recent decision [5] by Michigan State University to open a "women's only" space to men reveals. The solution to our student's weakness, so many critics all too often suggest, is bold, direct, repeated engagement with ideas that civil society has already deemed noxious, hateful and politically dangerous.

Setting aside the parodies and the critiques, there is a sound reason to support a broader, more comprehensive notion of safety, something that might be pushed to the very boundaries of our campuses: the world is sometimes breathtakingly, violently, terrifyingly precarious for precisely the sorts of students whom we are now actively recruiting.

Colleges and universities are, pop culture tells us repeatedly, supposed to be walled off. No wonder, then, that students see higher education institutions as both a staging ground for their protests and as a possible idyll. No wonder, too, that they keenly sense the distance between what was promised in glossy brochures -- a removed experience, a free space for serious conversation -- and what was delivered in the strange environs of a new town or city far from home -- more of the same social and political pressures, more of the same violence, whether discursive or physical. Indeed, what they read in the words of those who champion "free speech" -- which almost always seems to mean the freedom to speak of things consistently defined as backward or troubling -- is that many would like a very different "safe space," in which one can say racist or sexist things without consequence.

The insistent request for administrators and faculty members to "do something"-- to rename a building, to remove a mural, to replace a mascot, to disarm the campus police, to disinvite a speaker -- is a plea to create the conditions where this promised distance was once again possible, to clear cut a firebreak between the dystopian "real world" and the contemplative, even monkish world of study. But it is also to acknowledge a real world in which these icons have led violent charges, to recognize a physical world in which there are disenfranchised people of color for whom these things are reminders of real pain. To paraphrase one university president, [6] students need safe spaces in order to acquire the dangerous knowledge they need.

The safety we want -- that campus-wide, reflective, self-aware distance from the grit of the everyday -- is going to be hard to manufacture. As anyone with a smartphone knows, new digital technologies and a proliferation of social media outlets have allowed the enduring, everyday violence of racism to be broadcast, to be felt by so many all at once, in ways that are powerful. Those same technologies have also fostered new social connections, creating the movements and communities that mount these critiques. Social media lets us see absence, too.

The development, in the decades since the Civil Rights Movement, of antiseptic, color-blind institutional racism means, as well, that while we see racism online -- and in person -- we see far less justice than we once did. Vigilante shooters go unpunished. Mass incarceration is further entrenched. Military technologies, distributed to the police, get ever more sophisticated and punitive. In mounting their protests, students are driven by a sober-minded concern about the conditions of everyday life because they have been living in the midst of everything, touched personally or emotionally by violence or poverty or loss or disenfranchisement. These days, it seems, one simply cannot escape the blaring headlines and vivid color photos that program algorithms put in your feed.

Maybe the extraordinary penetration of digital media into our campuses requires us to work harder at being more mindful in other ways, in other forms of engagement. Maybe it puts more of a burden on us to be kind, to be gentle, to be supportive. Maybe it should force us to understand, more broadly, the lived experiences of our students before they arrive. Maybe, finally, it should mean that when we, as members of a community, invoke our right to "free speech," we don't do so in defense of obnoxious, cruel and broken-down ideas. At the very least, we should proactively work to create such spaces *before* things go awry.

"Safe space" seems like a pretty rarified concept, of course. <u>And, to some, it reads as an expression of privilege</u> [7]. I admit that absolute safety is an impossible construct, because learning requires risk. But not all risks are equal, and there is a difference between a campus shuttle to get around a city and a campus commitment to the broadest possible notion of safety. My colleagues and friends teaching in Texas are strategizing, right this second, about how to teach with a gun in the classroom or how to discuss a "grade" with a student who might be packing. Mothers and fathers sending their daughters off to college are rightly concerned about rape and sexual violence. Parents of color are worried that their children might get profiled, arrested, roughed up or much, much worse. I am concerned, as a faculty member, as a parent, and as a human being about teaching a class on race and racism knowing that every single student in the room has seen Eric Garner, Alton Sterling and too many others die in vivid Technicolor. Concerned, too, that at any moment a news alert might pop up on our phones about the next disaster.

Faculty members and administrators thus have a calling to act. Without delay. To remove that racist mural and relocate it to a museum. To rename that building and historicize the old name. (<u>If you have to raise the money to do it, there are examples where that has worked</u> [8]). To practice discernment in scheduling talks or speakers, so that we don't bring that bigot, thug or provocateur to the campus just to win a news cycle or to get your think tank in the paper. To prioritize ideas and visitors who are actively, constructively engaged in *solving* (and not *making*) social problems. To recommit to the historic, ancient role of the university as a site of knowledge production and to do what must be done to build, in the age of social media, a campus that feels removed and distant, yet also grounded and aware.

It is not our job to make intellectual noise -- a raucous debate, a clashing set of ideas, a hurtful back-and-forth -- just because we can. It *is* our job, as stewards of the very idea of the university, to think hard, at some distance, about big problems and to provide material solutions. After all, every unread essay or delayed book has consequences, every missing word defers a social change, and every abbreviated paper or poorly-written research project stalls those solutions. The crucial thing is to get ahead of the curve: to read the campus as it presently exists, to think in explicitly utopian terms about what it might look like, and to move towards this new ideal well in advance of some dramatic event or hurtful misdeed.

Matthew Pratt Guterl is chair of American studies and professor of Africana studies, American studies and ethnic studies at Brown University.

Section:
<u>Diversity</u> [9]
Editorial Tags:
<u>Student life</u> [10]
Image Caption:
University of Chicago

Links:

[1] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/08/25/u-chicago-warns-incoming-students-not-expect-safe-spaces-or-trigger-warnings

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/opinion/sunday/judith-shulevitz-hiding-from-scary-ideas.html

[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/05/us/college-protests-alumni-donations.html?_r=0

[4] http://www.theonion.com/article/parents-dedicate-new-college-safe-space-honor-daug-50851

[5] http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2016/07/29/msu_opens_a_women_only_lounge_to_men_after_a_title_ix_complaint.html

[6] https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-to-create-inclusive-campus-communities-first-create-safe-places/2016/01/15/069f3a66-bb94-11e5-829c-26ffb874a18d_story.html?utm_term=.9733727bb99f

[7] https://newrepublic.com/article/121353/college-safe-spaces-hypersensitivity-are-not-all-students-fault

[8] http://chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/to-remove-confederate-from-a-buildings-name-vanderbilt-will-return-an-83-year-old-donation/113506

[9] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/diversity

[10] https://www.insidehighered.com/taxonomy/term/119