

OPINION

Speaking up on campus doesn't mean shouting down others

The fear of speaking up is driving discourse down. What speech will be left to save if no one is talking?

By Sian Beilock and Phil Hanlon Updated June 2, 2023, 3:00 a.m.



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Seemingly every day, we hear another voice in the robust national conversation around freedom of expression on university campuses. But it isn't what people are saying on campus that's the problem. Rather it is self-censorship, what is being left unsaid, that is the true issue.

There's no doubt that academic inquiry is under attack, from conservatives attempting to ban [entire majors](#) to progressives who want to restrict potentially [upsetting content](#). We all lose when our learning spaces become subject to censorship, but it would be a mistake to assume that the biggest threat to academic freedom is political or even institutional. It is our own unwillingness to speak that has eroded our ability to seek deeper truth through the interchange of ideas — in academia and beyond. The fear

of speaking up is driving discourse down. What speech will be left to save if no one is talking?

As college presidents — one who has led Dartmouth for a decade and the other who will take the helm this fall — we see no escape from the culture wars that continue to stoke deep division in nearly all corners of our society without learning how to speak up when others disagree. The only way to find common ground is by ensuring that we have the skills to engage in productive discourse and not letting ourselves or others be silenced. And the development of that skill set and that commitment for every American must begin with the education system.

For years higher education has allowed itself to become the epicenter of the debate on where the line should be drawn between academic freedom and inclusive learning environments, and for too long we chose to believe that “safe spaces” were working when what they were really doing was silencing. Colleges are where ideas are tested, and so it is our responsibility to cultivate “brave spaces” instead.

As humans, we don’t like wading into the unknown, and our shortcut-loving brains are [wired to learn](#) only when we’re pushed to confront unfamiliar information. One teaching approach designed to foster real-world learning involves creating [desirable difficulty](#), which is the practice of tasking students with learning activities that are just beyond their comfort zone and has been shown to strengthen learning outcomes.

[As sociologist Amy Binder told The New York Times](#) (and as we see on campus every day), in today’s [left-leaning](#) higher education landscape, conservative students on campus are probably benefiting more from thinking about and debating opposing ideas than students who are not challenged as often. Practice matters. Higher education is the place where future leaders can get time on task.

If, in the course of their schooling, students aren’t being challenged to consider ideas and perspectives that are unfamiliar or contradict their own, we’ll have failed tremendously to prepare them for the world that awaits. Consider that almost half of college students wouldn’t consider rooming with a person who [voted differently](#) than they did in the 2020 presidential election. Or that 59 percent withhold [expressing their political views](#) in class for fear of ridicule from their [peers](#). Unfortunately, this behavior aligns with how our brains are conditioned to process information.

[Confirmation bias](#) leads us all to gravitate toward messages that affirm our beliefs, ignoring pesky contradictory evidence. It’s why we find it safer to latch on to popular views rather than openly challenge the status quo. By letting biases run unchecked on campus, mostly by allowing them to go unacknowledged, higher education has played an undeniable role in rendering all of us incapable of recognizing our collective humanity, limiting our capacity for shared understanding.

A simple start can be made by sharing this research in the classroom. Studies have shown that when you remind people that embracing discomfort is good for learning,

they become motivated to explore new or opposing ideas. [In a study](#) conducted in the lead-up to the 2020 election, Democrats who were told that discomfort is a sign of learning were more likely to seek out news related to the opposing party, such as Fox News, and Republicans who were told the same thing spent more time reading The New York Times. Even in the midst of seemingly unprecedented culture wars, our brains do grow when faced with adversity — but only when we have the courage to take the plunge.

Political theorist Wendy Brown put it best: We need to [orient students](#) around the histories, social theories, laws, and jurisprudence of what can and can't be said in a classroom, not just regulate them through “time, place, and manner” codes, or vague policies on campus speech conduct.

We must set a new example by equipping students — many of whom will be our future leaders — with the tools to navigate discomfort and complexity so that when they inevitably encounter challenges to their ideas and positions they confront the challenge. We need our institutions to resume their place as bastions of rigorous academic debate, where students are afforded the space to try on new ideas and vet existing ones. Students want this too, as noted in [an article by Barnard student Ash Kahn](#). If we can help them embrace the idea that being “right” is less important than being engaged, we might persuade those who would choose silence to risk being wrong.

The 2024 election is a window of opportunity for colleges to step up and demonstrate brave spaces in action. We should be intentional about opening up the debate stage to a range of diverse opinions and acknowledging that students can expect discomfort — and that that's OK.

At Dartmouth, an early priority will be making sure the New Hampshire primary serves as a learning opportunity for students to understand how critical civic discourse is in upholding our democracy. Teaming with the student-led Dartmouth Political Union, The Nelson A. Rockefeller Center for Public Policy and the Social Sciences and The John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth are bringing faculty and students together in a collaborative process to invite speakers to campus who represent a full range of voices. Simultaneous initiatives like the [Voices of Dissent project](#) will invite to campus activists who have put themselves in harm's way by speaking their mind. We hope that these inspiring stories will motivate members of our community to have the courage to air unpopular opinions.

Our nation's colleges and universities have an imperative to give students the tools and resilience to share their point of view — whether in agreement or disagreement — so we can break new ground. This isn't to say that every idea merits academic inclusion. Controversy for its own sake doesn't contribute to a better understanding of an issue and has no place in the classroom, but we'd venture to say that controversy of any kind (even at its worst) is much less dangerous if everyone else is prepared and empowered to openly disagree.

To break this habit, colleges and universities need to lead by example. We must confront our worst fears of being screamed into submission or having our ideas represented in fallacies and falsehoods, and we need to teach the next generation of leaders to do the same. To paraphrase Eleanor Roosevelt, we must do the thing we think we cannot do. We need to be brave.

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