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Safe Spaces On College Campuses Are Creating Intolerant Students

Ideological safe spaces make those on the left and the right more extreme.

Flemming Rose

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People protesting controversial Breitbart writer Milo Yiannopoulos take to the streets on Feb. 1 in Berkeley, California. A scheduled speech by Yiannopoulos was cancelled after protesters and police engaged in violent skirmishes.

Van Jones, an American political and civil rights activist and former adviser to former President Barack Obama, recently spoke at the University of Chicago. The host asked Jones about the increasing demand from students to be protected from ideas and speakers they don't like.

Van Jones's response deserves to be quoted at length. It was a compelling argument for political and ideological diversity on college campuses and for young people's need to be challenged in order to grow and mature as human beings and maybe at some point make a difference in society. Jones castigated ideological self-segregation.

"There are two ideas about safe spaces," he explained, referring to some college students' request for "safe spaces," where they can get together without being exposed to ideas and speech that make them feel uncomfortable. "One is a very good idea, and one is a terrible idea." The good idea, he said, is "being physically safe on campus, not being subjected to sexual harassment and physical abuse."

Jones continued:

"But there is another view that is now ascendant ... It's a horrible view, which is that 'I need to be safe ideologically, I need to be safe emotionally, I just need to feel good all the time. And if

someone else says something that I don't like, that is a problem for everyone else, including the administration.”

Jones suggested that safe spaces insulating students from certain ideas contradicts the purpose of a university:

I think that's a terrible idea for the following reason: I don't want you to be safe ideologically. I don't want you to be safe emotionally. I want you to be strong. That's different. I'm not going to pave the jungle for you. Put on some boots, and learn how to deal with adversity. I'm not going to take the weights out of the gym. That's the whole point of the gym.

You can't live on a campus where people say stuff that you don't like? [...] You are creating a kind of liberalism that the minute it crosses the street into the real world is not just useless but obnoxious and dangerous. I want you to be offended every single day on this campus. I want you to be deeply aggrieved and offended and upset and then to learn how to speak back.

Van Jones's remarks were met with applause from the audience. But six professors at Wellesley College didn't hear or didn't heed Van Jones's advice. In an email to the Wellesley community in the aftermath of a recent visit by leading feminist intellectual and cultural critic Laura Kipnis, they proposed setting up a censorship committee to vet speakers in order to make sure that “disempowered groups” would be protected from ideas and speech they find offensive and harmful. The professors claimed that bringing somebody like Kipnis and other “guest speakers with controversial and objectionable beliefs” to campus “impose on the liberty of students, staff and faculty at Wellesley.”

This is exactly the kind of reasoning dictatorships use to shut down unwanted speech, where censorship is justified in the name of security, public safety or social harmony. That's top-down censorship. But censorship can also be exercised from the bottom up. This has been the case with students who exclude, disinvite and shut down speakers whose opinions they don't like. It's a big irony that the Wellesley professors' call for censorship happened as a reaction to Kipnis's talk at Censorship Awareness Week. And it's baffling to see professors at an elite college being unable to distinguish between bullying the disempowered and making an argument. Alexis Zhang, a former Wellesley student, castigated the professors' e-mail in an op-ed in the Boston Herald:

The message — shocking for any institution of learning — is that Wellesley students should not need to tax their minds and hearts rebutting arguments they find disagreeable.

As a Wellesley alumna, I find this alarming. What would a campus without disagreement look like? How can Wellesley do its job of preparing women leaders to challenge orthodoxies and make their mark on the world without unfettered commitment to freedom of expression and dialogue? As the college's own mission statement points out: 'There is no greater benefit to one's intellectual and social development ... than the forthright engagement with and exploration of unfamiliar viewpoints and experiences.'

Because there was this space where you could interact with people who didn't agree with you ... I started testing my own assumptions. Barack Obama

In 2015, Obama gave a speech to high school students in Des Moines, Iowa, in which he talked about his own experience as a student belonging to a disempowered group and being raised by a single mother. Obama stressed the need for ideological diversity on college campuses:

Look, the purpose of college is not just, as I said before, to transmit skills. It's also to widen your horizons; to make you a better citizen; to help you to evaluate information; to help you make your way through the world; to help you be more creative. The way to do that is to create a space where a lot of ideas are presented and collide, and people are having arguments, and people are testing each other's theories, and over time, people learn from each other, because they're getting out of their own narrow point of view and having a broader point of view. ...

[W]hen I went to college, suddenly there were some folks who didn't think at all like me. And if I had an opinion about something, they'd look at me and say, well, that's stupid. And then they'd describe how they saw the world. And they might have had a different sense of politics, or they might have a different view about poverty, or they might have a different perspective on race, and sometimes their views would be infuriating to me. But it was because there was this space where you could interact with people who didn't agree with you and had different backgrounds that I then started testing my own assumptions. And sometimes I changed my mind. Sometimes I realized, you know what, maybe I've been too narrow-minded. Maybe I didn't take this into account. Maybe I should see this person's perspective.

Laura Kipnis is a professor at Northwestern University, where she teaches filmmaking, and she is the author of five books on a wide range of topics. Two years ago, she became the target of a so-called Title IX investigation after having published an essay in Chronicle of Higher Education criticizing “sexual paranoia” on campuses. Two graduate students filed Title IX complaints arguing that the essay had a “chilling effect” on students’ ability to report sexual misconduct. After a 72-day investigation, Kipnis was cleared of any wrongdoing. But only after she publicly exposed her treatment in a second essay titled “My Title IX Inquisition.”

Title IX is a 1972 law intended to protect students against sexual discrimination, but its application has been expanded so the law is now being used, among other things, to police classroom content. The law has been criticized by free speech groups like the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. Kipnis was invited to Wellesley as part of Censorship Awareness Week to talk about her case and her forthcoming book *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*. (Full disclosure — I spoke at Censorship Awareness Week the day after Kipnis.)

In her talk — I was in the audience during her talk with my daughter — Kipnis criticized what she sees as a deranged feminism driven by a new paternalism that is based on the notion that women need to be protected while men have to be surveilled. Kipnis said there’s no better way to subjugate women than to tell them that an assault awaits around every corner. Kipnis suggested that young women should be taught self-defense and learn how to turn down unwanted advances. There’s an urgent need for sexual education of young people.

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Kipnis perceives that what is going on on college campuses is part of a broader cultural shift: “My generation saw sex as a source of pleasure and liberation. Today, many see it as a risk and a danger that demands more control by university administrations. It implies delegating enormous power to employers and administrations instead of being in control of our own lives. If this is called feminism, then feminism is broken.”

Kipnis’s talk was well-received. It was a small audience, 30 people or so, a mix of students, professors and guests with no connection to Wellesley College. Most questions were asked to clarify points with no stated disagreements. Nobody was forced to attend the speech.

Kipnis was challenged by two female students. One explained that administrative regulation and the anti-sexual misconduct movement has contributed to her sexual liberation. It has given her more power in sexual relations because she is aware of her rights. Another student took issue with Kipnis’s thesis about sexual paranoia on campus and a reference to statistics showing that there are fewer cases of sexual abuse. The student said that a majority of her close friends have been sexually assaulted by longtime boyfriends and not taken legal recourse even though they had been forced to have sex against their will. The disagreements were expressed forcefully, though there was no sense of hostility. It was an enlightened exchange of opinions.

Kipnis’s talk and the following back-and-forth with the audience unfolded in a spirit of mutual civility and a willingness to listen to one another. Kipnis praised the students for asking questions that revealed key dilemmas in the debate about sexual misconduct on campuses. The six Wellesley professors who accused Kipnis of “bullying the disempowered” in her lecture have no base in reality. In an [interview](#), Kipnis called the accusation “absurd.”

“What actually happened,” she said, “was that there was a lively back-and-forth after I spoke. The students were smart and articulate, including those who disagreed with me.”

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The potentially disastrous consequences of the position stated by the six Wellesley professors reach far beyond college campuses. To many Americans, the 2016 election was a wake-up call. Jonathan Haidt, a professor of moral psychology at New York University and a vocal supporter of political diversity on campuses, [put it this way](#):

Americans have long known that they have racial, ethnic, class and partisan divides. But the 2016 presidential election has forced all of us to recognize that these gaps may be far larger, more numerous and more dangerous than we thought. Americans are not just failing to meet each other and know each other. Increasingly, we hate each other — particularly across the partisan divide.

In order to fight ideological self-segregation, some media organizations have introduced new features. The New York Times regularly [references](#) noteworthy writing from both the left and right. New apps are being developed to help users getting out of their bubbles to be exposed to points of views that they disagree with.

Ideological and other kinds of diversity are important on college campuses and in a liberal democracy because they cultivate tolerance, which in many ways is diametrical to our instincts. We have to learn to live side by side with values, opinions and ways of life that we don't like. It's crucial for the concept of tolerance that we speak out against what we disagree with. But there are limits. The concept of tolerance implies that we refrain from using violence, intimidation, threats and bans to silence our opponents. This isn't easy. It's painful. In Europe, it took our forefathers hundreds of years to foster a climate of peaceful coexistence among communities adhering to different beliefs.

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Providing room for ideological diversity also helps fight extremism and destructive polarization. Cass Sunstein, a Harvard law professor, wrote an important book called *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*. He analyzes social-psychological experiments dealing with group dynamics, extremism and polarization. His conclusion: When people find themselves in groups of likeminded types, they are especially likely to move to extremes. When people on the left and on the right only talk to likeminded people, their opinions tend to become more extreme. This insight is not limited to particular periods, nations and cultures. It happens in politics, families, businesses, faith-based communities and student organizations.

It doesn't mean that individuals and society won't benefit from deliberations within communities. This promotes the development of positions that would otherwise be invisible or silenced. Many social movements have been made possible through this route, including the civil rights movement and the LGBTQ rights movement. However, it is important to ensure that such enclaves are not walled off from competing views and that there is an exchange of views between members of a group and those who disagree with them.

Sunstein's argument explains the value of bringing somebody like Laura Kipnis to Wellesley. It also explains why it is of value to invite the libertarian Charles Murray to speak at Middlebury College and engage with students who don't like his work. The importance of listening to people with whom we disagree involves a process that is fundamental to being human beings. As the British historian Timothy Garton Ash puts it in his excellent book on free speech:

Only with freedom of expression can I understand what it is to be you. Only by articulating our differences can we clearly see what they are, and why they are what they are.

Openness about all kinds of human difference is as vital as civility. I cannot fully express myself – that is, my self – unless I identify my differences with others. We all notice differences and respond to them both consciously and unconsciously. Unless we explore these responses and feelings, we have no chance of digging down to the hidden biases of which we are not aware. If we “speak as we feel/not what we ought to say,” as Shakespeare puts it at the end of King Lear, we can learn from experience what is hurtful to others and hence discover for ourselves what it takes to live together as neighbors.

Flemming Rose is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. He previously served as foreign affairs editor and culture editor at the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten. During his tenure as culture

editor, Rose was principally responsible for the September 2005 publication of the cartoons that initiated the Muhammad cartoons controversy in early 2006. Since then, he has been an international advocate for freedom of speech and is the author of several books, including The Tyranny of Silence, published by the Cato Institute in 2014.