



## What is lost when universities self-censor

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A recent opinion piece in The New York Times spoke to the ideological intolerance and accompanying self-censorship that has crept its way into many people's lives. The author, a college senior at the University of Virginia, described how students must "hold back – in class discussions, in friendly conversations, on social media – from saying what [they] really think," when discussing subjects like diversity training, racial justice, and gender. It is only when the author is quite literally behind closed doors, speaking in hushed tones with her professors and friends, that ideas can freely circulate, according to the piece.

It's a hostility I know well.

Open dialogue used to be the hallmark of academic conversations and the purpose of pursuing higher education. Instead, I constantly hear from students about how they refrain from asking questions or offering their opinions out of fear that they will anger their peers and alienate their professors. There is a quiet understanding that failing to regurgitate certain preapproved leftist platitudes will bring about disaster in the classroom and beyond.

A survey by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education and RealClearEducation found that about four in five university students report self-censoring at least some of the time, and roughly one in five students say they do it often. These effects were found regardless of one's identity markers, including race or sexual orientation.

The problem affects students and academics across the political spectrum, but it is disproportionately felt by right-leaning individuals. This is because left-leaning professors tend to outnumber conservative professors on campus; in social sciences and humanities departments, which are primarily focused on cultural politics and activism, left-leaning professors dominate at a ratio of 14 to one.

The Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology found that more than half of conservative academics admit to self-censoring in their research and teaching, and 70 per cent report a departmental climate that is hostile to their beliefs. Political discrimination takes the form of excluding professors from hiring, funding and social situations, like sitting together at lunch. It

also normalizes attitudes about firing them for controversial or politically incorrect research findings.

These consequences are further amplified by university administrators and other professors who fail to defend academics when they are attacked for their work, deciding instead to remain silent or siding with the loud minority of students having a meltdown.

The fact that closed-mindedness is being rewarded throughout a system responsible for educating impressionable minds should be unsettling to anyone enjoying the benefits of living in a democracy. To make matters worse, critics on the political left will too often claim that concerns of self-suppression are overblown, missing an opportunity to use their platforms to advocate for a solution.

We rightfully frown upon discriminating against people based on characteristics like race, sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, yet it remains socially acceptable to exclude and demonize people for their political beliefs. This is not an issue confined to the loony fringes of the academic world, but something that affects everyday people in the workplace, as well.

According to a Cato Institute poll, nearly one-third of Americans say they worry about losing job opportunities or being fired if their political opinions become known. This self-censorship affects people across the political spectrum, but is again particularly pronounced among conservatives (77 per cent say they feel prevented from saying things they believe) and highly educated people (44 per cent of Americans with a postgrad degree say they fear losing their job or missing out on opportunities if their political opinions became known).

Ideological dissenters are not the only ones harmed by this illiberalism. Students who don't fear unwanted consequences for their opinions are also adversely affected. Completing several years or degrees in an academic setting without having to seriously contend with a different point of view reinforces the false perception that the affirmed, often hyper-progressive values are, by default, correct. It impedes one's ability to reconcile that people of different political persuasions or opinions are still fellow humans and thus worthy of respect.

After all, some of the most interesting and inspiring conversations can flourish from disagreement. Students who are shielded from these exchanges miss vital opportunities to refine their critical thinking skills and better understand the world we live in. Instead, our universities are allowing them to languish in a fantasyland in which adhering to popular opinion, and ignoring all others, warrants praise, ascendancy and immunity from criticism.