



Are the Kids Alright? Feature: Heterodox Academy's 2018 Open Mind Conference

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Dozens gathered at the *New York Times's* [event center](#) just off of Times Square on Friday for the first annual Open Mind conference, a meeting of luminaries organized by Heterodox Academy (or HxA, as it is styled) to discuss why, exactly, America's campuses are growing more hostile to speech.

The number of students [reporting to Gallup](#) that their campuses are hostile to those who speak their minds rose seven points between 2016 and 2017, hitting 61 percent. Two-thirds of respondents of all ages to a [Cato Institute poll](#) said that colleges aren't doing enough to "teach the value of free speech." At the same time, students are genuinely split over the costs that free speech absolutism might impose. According to Gallup, 53 percent prefer "inclusion" to "free speech," and just under a majority support speech codes.

[The group](#), founded by moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt and claiming some 1,800 professors and graduate students as members, wants to combat the perceived closing off of discourse "by increasing viewpoint diversity, mutual understanding, and constructive disagreement."

"This is our coming out party as an organization," Sean Stevens, Research Director at HxA, told the *Free Beacon*. "We're trying to bring together professors, policymakers, reporters, basically anyone that's interested and concerned about these issues. We're trying to get everyone in the same room to talk about it."

The party was a big one, starting Thursday night with a glitzy dinner, followed by a day of panels opining on the rise of campus intolerance and what if anything is to be done about it. Haidt kicked off the event, highlighting the idea of Heterodox Academy and its commitment to "viewpoint diversity"—a [flashy video](#) argued that this is the only remedy to the rampant threat of confirmation bias.

Haidt retook the stage a little later alongside Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education and Haidt's co-author of a [2015 article](#) soon to be converted into a [full-length book](#), *The Coddling of the American Mind*. The two have developed a psychosocial

analysis of what, precisely, has made today's college students so wacky—a combination of cognitive biases, a compulsive terror of harm to ourselves and our children, and a natural human tendency toward tribalism that forces students to compete for status on- and off-line using the tools of "call out culture."

This last suggestion, that campus censorship is an outgrowth of basic human nature, echoes commentators like Jonah Goldberg who have argued that modern, liberal society is an unnatural construction, which must be defended consciously lest it be lost to atavism.

"Freedom of speech and academic freedom, they don't come naturally," Lukianoff said. *New York Times* columnist and event moderator Bari Weiss echoed that sentiment: "Free speech and ... what happens on college campuses, not just in the classroom, but also living with people you disagree with, is unnatural, that it's natural for us to be in our tribe with people we agree with."

Between Haidt's appearances was a panel of professors who have faced student intolerance. Among them was Heather Heying, who along with husband Bret Weinstein fled Evergreen State College amid massive campus protests. These were sparked by Weinstein's objection to a "day of absence," during which white students and professors were asked to stay away from campus in order to highlight racism.

"This was a college that was a beacon of progressive values, actual progressive values, with an experimental pedagogy unlike anywhere else in the country," Heying said. Such progressive values did not forestall bat-wielding students from bringing havoc to Evergreen State's tiny Washington state campus.

According to Haidt, HxA's members are equally distributed across the political spectrum. However, most of the professors appearing on Friday—with the notable exception of the eminent Princeton professor Robbie George—were self-professed liberals, albeit the kind quick to qualify their liberalism with condemnations of the strange turn that the young left has taken.

A degree of self-awareness colored many of their comments as a result. Alice Dreger, an ousted bioethics professor whom HxA presented its courage award to over lunch, pointed out during her own panel that what Heterodox Academy called "viewpoint diversity" was a key talking point of academic feminists when Dreger herself was a graduate student.

"I'm happy to say now that what's happening at Heterodox is feminist standpoint epistemology," Dreger quipped.

Her comment captured how free speech liberalism on campus has been forced to reorient itself as the American left has grown more radical and less tolerant. That campus speech has become a rallying cry for Conservatives is odd: When Conservative godfather Bill Buckley wrote *God and Man at Yale* in 1951, he subtitled it "The Superstitions of 'Academic Freedom'" to indicate his belief that the totally free exchange of ideas was little more than a cover for communist infiltration of the academy.

The campus free speech movement is often dated to the massive protests at UC Berkeley in 1964 and 1965. Yet if such protests happened today, Open Mind panelist professor Angus Johnston observed, they "would be wildly unpopular, including with a lot of people in this room."

Nonetheless, Open Minds brought together conservatives and liberals, unified by the fear of losing that constructed freedom alluded to by Lukianoff and Weiss.

"There's a ton of diversity," Nicholas Phillips, a research associate with HxA, told the *Free Beacon*. "There are free speech absolutists [who] think that higher ed. is just completely corrupt. And there are people that are much more moderate, who just want institutions to work well, and who think that polarization is inimical to institutions working well."

HxA is still young, and its coalition is a diffuse and sometimes disagreeable one, to say the least. But, for those concerned that campus speech is already on its way out, Friday's conference offered a space to discuss what is to be done. And that, at least, is a start.