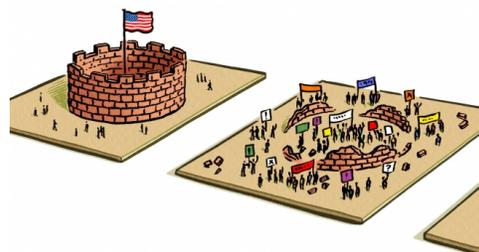


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Our Idea of Tolerant Isn't

By Philip Alcabes | OCTOBER 16, 2016 ✓ PREMIUM



Christophe Vorlet for The Chronicle Review

You get used to the vehemence. In academe, anything that's published about our own special place gets somebody going. Even so, the vituperation among the professoriate generated by the journalist Nathan Heller's May 2016 *New Yorker* article, "The Big Uneasy," took me aback.

A case study of student discontent at Oberlin College, the essay is by no means the first to raise academic hackles about students. Before Heller, the Northwestern University professor and feminist Laura Kipnis stirred an outcry in these pages with her charges of "sexual paranoia" among women students on campus. Todd Gitlin, a former president of Students for a Democratic Society and now a professor at Columbia University, decried a "plague of hypersensitivity" among students fearful of words that wound. There have been many more outcries in a similar vein.

Having taken for granted that the university is supposed to be an intellectual agora, some of us academics, discovering that our own students would rather be protected from certain ideas than explore them, are taking out our pitchforks to avert impending disaster. But we can learn something from our students. The open campus was never really as open as we thought.

Students sometimes force professors to choose between devotion to open-mindedness and our humane impulse to care for them. Some students seem unwilling to give all ideas equal consideration. Others feel oppressed by the obligation to do so. Some want safe spaces to be protected from speech, at least if free speech means that ideas may be articulated by people whose experiences are different from their own. Others have experiences that make ideas alone seem shallow, irrelevant, offensive, or merely boring.

This student has been raped and doesn't feel able to sit through a classroom dissection of the sociology of sexual violence; that one lost a cousin when Israeli forces destroyed a house in Gaza and can't engage in a debate about Middle East

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politics; another one (to take an example from Heller's article) is a disabled, trans, bipolar man educated in Mexico and finds that nobody on campus can speak to his life.

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Professors respond: Trigger warnings about the content of courses that might be offensive are infantilizing and anti-intellectual. Students are too "me directed." Too intolerant.

The big surprise is that so much of this criticism comes from the left. Once, when we were students and then junior faculty, we agitated for openness as a way to lever out the old and intolerant worldviews of the powerful, to challenge the received wisdom of a market-friendly, patriarchal, reflexively anticommunist, and all too often racist status quo. The open campus was a hedge against the tyranny of conventional thinking. You would think that former activists would be the first to value the newly various experiences of today's students.

Unfortunately, we've become accustomed to a simplistic form of open-mindedness. It has only two benchmarks: debating ideas with civility, as long they as backed by reasoned inquiry, and holding reason above emotion. Those are admirable desires, but they don't ensure openness.

Engaging in reasoned debate or discussion means being both fair, which isn't hard, and intellectually tolerant of dissenting viewpoints, which is. A respected view of a liberal society is that it exercises minimal coercion against those who hold minority opinions. So we bind ourselves with the constraint of civility and hope that will suffice. It does, usually. But it's no guarantee.

As the university becomes home to more people — students and faculty — whose experiences are different from those that shaped the academics of the 1960s, '70s, or even '80s, and whose worldviews are consequently harder for the mainstream to see as reasonable, civility alone can tend to favor the customary, the traditional, or the dogmatic. And that can leave the people whose views have been differently shaped feeling silenced — an emotion we tend to brush aside. The cultural consensus, the political philosopher Martha Nussbaum has written, is likely to be "thick" but "vague," morally substantive but accommodating minority views. In an academic culture that values precision and clarity, however, the richness of consensus is easily distilled into something sharper but thinner. What's missing from the open-campus concept is the awareness that civility might not be enough to open the discourse.

For 50 years, academic freedom has been the cause célèbre of the professoriate, a shibboleth based in that version of openness that we prefer. We've dutifully cited *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*, the 1957 cornerstone academic-freedom case, in which the U.S. Supreme Court found against a state law applying a patriotism test for university lecturers. We've guarded academic freedom against myriad perceived threats, almost all as seen as coming from conservatives. We've defended it when critics have questioned courses on pornography or the hiring of outspoken opponents of American foreign policy. We've objected when

corporate cash has skewed the scholarly agenda. So, congratulating our virtuous selves for going to the barricades against the forces of intolerance, we are doubly appalled when the new threat comes from students whose causes we espouse. We joined these kids for Occupy Wall Street rallies, in #blacklivesmatter tweets, and in petitioning for gender-nonspecific bathrooms. And now they say they don't want the open campus that we've been holding high?

Senior faculty members who are the most vocal protectors of the tradition of the open-minded campus, having come of age in the '60s and '70s, should be well aware of the primacy of experience: It's what our generation stood for. Experience was sometimes as essential as free speech. It became our verb of choice, sometimes more often than it was a noun. "How did you *experience* the course?" we asked. "I *experienced* our argument as an attack on my values." When the god Jimi Hendrix asked, "Are You Experienced"?, we wanted to be able to answer, with open heart and political mind (and fervid loins), Yes!

Should we really be so skeptical when today's students read their experiences into the views and actions of others? We ought to be able to recognize that blackface and a faux noose might be experienced by an African-American student as an assault, not merely as a joke in questionable taste or merely marginal discomfort that (arguably) leads to deeper reasoning. We ought to consider that in a world in which values and the testimonies of witnesses are increasingly entangled, we might not know what is most valuable to a disabled, trans, bipolar, Mexican-educated student. Or to anyone.

Sure, it's easy to feel that something precious has been lost. It's also easy to see a fracturing of the left (as Heller suggests) into a proudly dogmatic old guard and a new wave intensely aware of its own vulnerability when those who claim to care most about the rights of others are at odds with those who are clamoring for their rights.

It's also easy, in our angst over threats to our definition of openness, to ignore the fact that many college students are still eager to be challenged by new ideas and to learn how to think about them critically. Almost always, that is the case at the public university where I teach. Friends who teach at other public universities, where many students are simply glad to have a chance to earn a degree, say the same. On the evidence from Oberlin, as well as from Amherst, Northwestern, Yale, Princeton, and most recently Georgetown — where students have made very public demands for safe spaces and have challenged the naming of buildings and mascots for long-dead proponents of slavery or white supremacy — some students on those campuses may be less dedicated to open-mindedness. But elite private institutions are not the universe of higher education.

Even there, though, campuses really are more diverse now — not just in terms of skin color or sexual orientation, but also as measured in life experiences. The poor are still far less likely to attend college than the affluent, and African-American or Hispanic-American high-school graduates less likely

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than whites. When universities claim to be "committed to diversity," the statement might be cynical — a way to protect their reputations or hew to federal affirmative-action guidelines. Still, the diversity of experience, and students' awareness of their experiences, is greater than ever. The fact that a disabled, bipolar, Mexican trans man at Oberlin, or a gender-fluid African-American who grew up in public housing, or deaf students, single mothers, retirees, traumatized refugees from war zones, as well as others who aren't conventional students can attend college today, including elite colleges, is a sign that the open-minded campus is more real than ever.

And remember: The open-minded campus was itself, at least partly, an aspirational myth. It excluded the poor, the dark-skinned, the disabled, and others from higher education. It was a dream of the academic liberal-left at a time when their interlocutors were likely to differ from them only in ideas, not in life experiences. It was a desire to take up new ideas that were analyzable through a widely shared consciousness.

Some saw through this: Even as early as the free-speech movement at the University of California at Berkeley, the philosopher Paul Feyerabend was skeptical. "What an opportunity, my rationalist friends told me, to contribute to the spreading of reason and the improvement of mankind! I felt very differently," he wrote. "For it dawned on me that the intricate arguments and the wonderful stories I had so far told to my more or less sophisticated audience might just be dreams, reflections of the conceit of a small group who had succeeded in enslaving everyone else with their ideas."

Our open-minded university hasn't turned out to be the perfect antidote to the illiberalism of traditional institutions. As Nathan Heller points out, colleges and universities have allowed students from minorities to enroll, but minority students often feel themselves to be not just students but also workers, unpaid labor, doing what he calls "the work of diversity." The civic order remains marked by discrimination and inequality. Opening minds doesn't always open doors.

A liberal education, in the sense of opening students' minds to all possible views, is training for discourse, or so I hope. It's how we maintain ethical dialogues in our society, constantly renewing the conversation on justice as our awareness changes. I encourage debate in my classroom, hoping that students will be uncomfortable sometimes, and that their discomfort will cause them to question their assumptions, and that in the questioning they'll find their way to new and deeper understanding.

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And I don't believe that the institution of the university is in unprecedented danger. Compared with its historical travails, including the Inquisition, bubonic plague, Nazification, McCarthyism, reduced financial support, and NCAA football, is the essence of the university truly threatened by trigger warnings? The challenge now is to hew to our own principles even when we don't like what we hear. Open the discussion. Remember that academic freedom can't be just for faculty: It has to protect the intellectual freedom of the

students whose thinking is formed by experiences we don't share. Turn away from the City Upon a Hill that the aspirational open campus represents and deal with the real university we live in. The university we still love.

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