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## Tolerance in Academic Debate

Mario Coronado Cartmell

*California State University, Monterey Bay*

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# Tolerance in Academic Debate

Mario Coronado Cartmell

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POLITICAL and social debate has become an increasingly toxic subject of discussion for Americans within the past few years, and for today's university and college students reasonable academic discussion about controversial content may begin to fade. Freedom of speech is a priceless gift to be used in the United States, however the current division of ideology and partisanship within the country has turned conversation into brute-like mudslinging. The social spheres people choose to be a part of, as well as the sources that people choose to receive their information from, are all tailor made to suit one's personal interests and beliefs. University campuses are special because they are secure environments where people can express personal beliefs, and debate with others about multi-sided issues. However, in recent years there has been a growing trend of intolerance toward controversial issues and an even stronger resentment for unpopular beliefs. The hypersensitivity of certain political and social issues has not actually caused awareness or improvement of these issues, but it has actually discouraged people from talking about it at all for fear of the conversation turning horribly wrong. In many cases, student organizations on college campuses that focus on the rights and safety of students, have now tried to limit opposing voices and presences on their campus by canceling controversial speakers and guests as well as accusing professors and educators as being insensitive or offensive when regarding touchy subjects. Safe spaces are defined as an environment where a person feels comfortable and is safe from emotional and physical harm. In addition, trigger warnings are also becoming more common, where warnings are given before reviewing or discussing sensitive or possibly offensive content. Safe spaces are valuable for students to receive the support they need, but they should not be used to police conversations or enforce their standards upon others. Although the first priority of any university campus is to ensure the safety of the student, the purpose of a university is to educate them by exposing them to new ideas, challenging their beliefs, and engaging them in passionate academic discussion.

Safe spaces, when used to block out opposing ideas and opinions, do not benefit college students. Many opportunities are lost when people do not simply listen to others and it is the opposite of what college students are supposed to do. There needs to be an understanding in the difference between hateful and uncivil language, and a stubborn, opposing argument. Choosing to not confront

beliefs that oppose one's own, prolongs the lesson for college students until they have entered the real world when college students are in the real world, where their actions result in real consequence. In an area of higher education students must realize their responsibility of entering the stage of adulthood. It is imperative that by the time they enter that stage, they have developed the ability to cooperate and coexist with their fellow human beings regardless of their conflicting worldviews. Flemming Rose, a Danish senior Journalist who is known for his journalism in free speech, wrote an article for the Huffington Post last year discussing this issue. "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" (Rose, 2018). Tolerance is essential to living in a democracy. It is essential to a peaceful and content life. The danger of safe spaces is that they have the potential to create echo chambers of group thinking; therefore, there is no new information or perspective to develop ideas. However, when in the proper context, safe spaces are in fact very beneficial to students.

Safe spaces can be important structures when they are used for students who are receiving the support that they need to be physically and mentally healthy. Groups and communities aimed at providing a safe and supportive environment are important for students coping with trauma and other stressful experiences in their life. Katherine Ho, an editor for the Harvard Political Review, wrote an article that sheds light on the confusion of the real definition for safe spaces in which she states, "emotional refuges like OSAPR and Room 13 as well as cultural groups are often referred to as "safe spaces." With this definition, "safe" denotes emotional protection. These groups provide students the opportunity to feel secure in times of distress and dysfunction, and they also provide a sense of community. Few would dispute the importance of these emotional spaces on campus" (Ho, 2018). Safe spaces can provide necessary resources to benefit the well-being of students living on campus. She clarifies that there are three general definitions that have been used and interpreted. The first of course are organizations that focus on offering a peaceful space for healing. The other positive definition would be an academic safe space, where those participating are encouraged to step out of their comfort zones. Safe spaces in general are what each classroom already is: an academic setting where ideas can be let out, discussed, and developed. In a classroom discussion, professors encourage students to generate dynamic discussions that allow students to speak their mind and learn from others'. Katherine Ho explains, "The idea of an academic safe space stresses the end goal of encouraging individuals to speak. In this type of space, people are still made to feel uncomfortable, yet it's 'safe' to take intellectual risks and explore any line of thought" (Ho, 2018). The entire idea of using safe spaces is to promote and encourage individuals to talk about their understanding of issues, which is the purpose of education. At the end of Katherine Ho's article was a comment section with a blurb above it, "The HPR welcomes relevant and respectful discussion, and reserves the right to remove toxic comments. Please read our Comment Policy before commenting", an appropriate note that

promotes the personal responsibility that would eliminate petty, unprofessional behavior. When safe spaces are used for their original purpose they improve a school's capacity for learning. Misinterpret the intent of these spaces and they will only be seen as emotional bubbles for those with frail ears. They are not made to defend an individual's feelings, but to help build their confidence and ability to confront challenges they may face and teach them how to communicate with others that may share different opinions.

Do not discourage ideological opposition. Embrace it. That is how ideas are made better. It provides the opportunity to learn from one another. Diversity in thought is just as important as diversity among people. If a group of people chooses to always agree with one another, then there will not be an opportunity to present new ideas. Any final product, whether it be a novel, piece of art, blueprint, or theory, is not constructed from the first draft. A final product requires revision, modification, criticism, and revision again. The original is important, yes, but it takes outside influence and a step back to see the full picture of something, so that when something is revised, it is done with perspective and a sense of gained wisdom. In a 2015 speech given by Barack Obama at a Des Moines high school, he wanted to impress upon the young students that college is an opportunity to listen to other's ideas and to test one's own:

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... (Barack Obama, qtd. in Rose, 2018).

He explained that his own experiences of getting into arguments with others, were some of the greatest learning moments because he developed an understanding of who the other person was, and why they believe what they believe. College is the exact place in which to broaden one's horizons. It is an environment designed to hold such conversations. Learning is not made to be easy, especially at a University. Van Jones, a well known academic and political commentator, and former advisor to Mr. Obama, is successful in politics because he learned to respectfully communicate with people and compromise with others, even if they disagree on every issue. In a 2017 article with the Huffington Post, they recount Jones's visit to the University of Chicago, where he was asked to talk about college students' new desire to shelter themselves from beliefs that scare or anger them. He explains that it is dangerous, immature behavior that makes students even less prepared for real life:

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 (Van Jones, qtd in Rose, 2018).

These are not the words of a disgruntled constitutionalist protecting the sanctity of the first amendment, but a Yale grad scholar who spent a great deal of his own life as a civil rights activist in the Bay Area. His experiences facing adversity made him more prepared for the next. He wanted students to be challenged

and to earn that education through their own self discovery and experience. Many misinterpret physical safety with emotional safety. As adults, college students must understand that the ideas of others will not actually harm them. They are in a space where the only vulnerability is their exposure to new and different thought. In reality, students are not bombarded with aggressive and insulting commentary everyday, what is important to remember is that students must build the strength and capacity to tolerate these situations when they do occur.

A student's personal feelings and emotional state should never be disregarded, and students should feel free to gather and support one another. RaeAnn Pickett's Time Magazine article relates her own use of safe spaces with students' desires to create more safe spaces. She points that even organizations focused on protecting free speech and limiting censorship have come to realize the importance that these spaces may have, "The decision doesn't take students wants or needs into account. As the National Coalition Against Censorship notes: 'In many cases, the request for trigger warnings comes from students themselves.' And safe spaces can have powerful therapeutic purposes for those who enter them" (Pickett, 2018). As a whole, today's Students have grown up with the most amount of accessible information in human history at their Fingertips. They know more about the significance and value of the LGBTQ community, they are more informed about the reality of sexual assault in the workplace, and young people now have a decent understanding of gun violence as well. Young people have the unique ability to influence modern culture in a way that no other group can. It also puts them in a special position to transform their society for the better, but it can only be done with open minds, and the desire to build a society where anyone can freely express their opinions and beliefs.

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