

9-17-2015

For Mature Audiences Only: A Liberal Arts Education

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Recommended Citation

Burstein, Mark, "For Mature Audiences Only: A Liberal Arts Education" (2015). *Presidential Addresses*. 27.
http://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_president/27

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Convocation 2015: For Mature Audiences Only: A Liberal Arts Education

Tim, thank you for that generous introduction.

Thank you Kathrine Handford for providing an organ prelude that sets the stage for this and every convocation. Thank you Phillip Swan, Steven Sieck and members of the freshman class for beginning our year with such beauty. I look forward to many future performances. And thank you, Howard Niblock, for your thoughtful selection of today's opening and closing words.

I also want to thank Tim Spurgin and the Convocation and Commencement Committee for assembling a provocative and engaging series. I hope you will join me in attending all convocations this year.

Welcome to the freshman class and our seven tenure line colleagues who moved to Appleton this fall. You will create the future of Lawrence. For the rest of your lives you will represent this university in all that you do. Thank you for joining us and renewing what it means to be a Lawrentian.

It is an absolute pleasure to be here today with you to celebrate the opening of our 167th academic year. I begin, grateful for the work last year by many colleagues to enhance the education we offer, and to the larger Lawrence community who, by virtue of their record-breaking investment in the future of this university, will allow us to make Lawrence more affordable. These efforts and others have given us extraordinary momentum. Thank you all for helping us sustain the exceptional education we offer.

I want to dedicate this talk to the 147 students who died at Garissa University College in Kenya last spring. We have reached a critical moment as a global community when a sectarian conflict can boil over into a terrorist attack on unarmed students who are trying to simply better themselves through education. We must stand with every other higher education institution to make our campuses safe from such violence.

It was a year of many remarkable events for Lawrence and for me, but what stands out most in my mind is a conversation that took place in a sexual misconduct working group meeting in July. As I mentioned in an email to our community a few weeks ago, a group of us met frequently this summer to update our sexual misconduct policies, procedures, and educational strategies in an effort to respond to issues that students raised last spring.

During the meeting a conversation began about the new web site. I suggested we post a rap video performed by a young man who lamented his having stood silently by, as a friend described a sexual assault. This video had a profound effect on me and I hoped the message would have the same impact on members of our community. Many in the working group thought this was a good idea. But one colleague asked, "Does the rap contain swear words?" I was then informed: we do not include content on our web site with profanity in deference to students and parents who would prefer not to hear this language.

At that moment my blood began to freeze. My mind ran to all the provocative literature and film with swear words that I have consumed. And I thought what have we done? How can it be appropriate for a college to self-censor our content in this way?

There have been many moments this past year where members of the Lawrence community have felt hurt, objectified, and unsafe in response to other people's views or comments expressed on campus, in the classroom, and on social media. Students, faculty, and staff have approached me with concerns about speech or action in relation to their identity. But does this mean we need to self-censor to the point of eliminating swear words to ensure all members of our community feel safe and supported? Or might we, instead, find balance between engaging on one hand with different, sometimes uncomfortable ideas and language, and on the other creating a supportive and welcoming campus community where all members can thrive?

We are not alone with the problem raised by self-censoring. In an interview last fall, actor and comedian Chris Rock said he had "stopped playing colleges . . . because they are way too conservative. Not in their political views – not like they're voting Republican – but in their social views and their willingness not to offend anybody. Kids raised on a culture of 'We're not going to keep score in the game because we don't want anybody to lose.' Or just ignoring race to a fault. You can't say "the black kid over there." No, it's "the guy with the red shoes." You can't even be offensive on your way to being inoffensive."

President Obama opined on this topic at a town hall meeting this past Monday in Iowa. He stated, "I've heard some college campuses where they don't want to have a guest speaker who is too conservative or they don't want to read a book if it has language that is offensive to African Americans or somehow sends a demeaning signal towards women, and I gotta tell you, I don't agree with that.." He went on, "I don't agree that you . . . have to be coddled and protected from different points of view. Anybody who comes to speak to you and you disagree with, you should have an argument with them, but you shouldn't silence them by saying you can't come because I'm too sensitive to hear what you have to say. That's not the way we learn."

The view that extreme sensitivity has taken over campuses is not limited to politicians and comedians. In a *New York Magazine* article called "Not a Very P.C. Thing to Say: How the language police are perverting liberalism," Jonathan Chait chronicles a number of incidents at UCLA, Harvard, Michigan, Mount Holyoke, and Stanford among others. He sums up this trend: "After political correctness burst onto the academic scene in the late '80s and early 90's, it went into a long remission. Now it has returned."

He argues that we, as faculty and administrators, have overreacted to this movement with trigger warnings and campaigns to eradicate microaggressions. He recalls one professor at a prestigious university telling him that, "just in the last few years, she has noticed a dramatic upsurge in her student's sensitivity toward even the mildest social or ideological slights; she and her fellow faculty members are terrified of facing accusations of triggering trauma -- or, more consequentially, violating her school's new sexual-harassment policy -- merely by carrying out the traditional academic work of intellectual exploration."

Trigger warnings have been defined as “alerts that professors are expected to issue if something in a course might cause a strong emotional response.” And microaggressions have been defined as “small actions or word choices that seem on their face to have no malicious intent, but that are thought of as a kind of violence nonetheless.”

Chait is not alone in raising the alarm. Many recent books and articles have been published claiming college communities have curtailed freedom of speech.

Not all efforts to sanitize the educational environment come from the political left. For example, this fall an entering Duke freshman started a Facebook campaign against the assignment of a book that Lawrentians know well, *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel. This student objected to it “because I think sexuality is becoming more and more commonplace in our culture, and that’s a risk. Universities like Duke . . . risk isolating or even discriminating against people with conservative beliefs.” Another student posted “I am a Christian, and the nature of *Fun Home* . . . violates my conscience due to its pornographic nature.”

Fun Home has caused a stir on many campuses. Among other incidents of censure, state legislators in South Carolina proposed to cut government support for the College of Charleston in response to the inclusion of *Fun Home* on a reading list. At Lawrence two years ago, I found Bechdel’s convocation speech riveting but in no way subversive of core human values.

In a *New York Times* opinion piece entitled “Hiding from Scary Ideas: Do students really need cookies and Play-doh to deal with the trauma of listening to unpopular opinions?” Judy Shulevitz, tried to explain why so many people feel the urge to minimize controversial topics: “Safe spaces,” she said, “are an expression of the conviction, increasingly prevalent among college students, that their schools should keep them from being ‘bombarded’ by discomfiting or distressing viewpoints.” She cites events at Brown, Columbia, Oxford, Northwestern, and Smith to illustrate her point.

Shulevitz is not concerned that free speech has been diminished, or that we have become too politically correct. She worries that this trend limits the power of the education we as colleges can provide. She understands that, “keeping college-level discussions ‘safe’ may feel good to the hypersensitive.” But she believes: “it’s bad for them and for everyone else. People ought to go to college to sharpen their wits and broaden their field of vision. Shield them from unfamiliar ideas, and they’ll never learn the discipline of seeing the world as other people see it. They’ll be unprepared for the social and intellectual headwinds that will hit them as soon as they step off the campuses whose climates they have so carefully controlled. What will they do when they hear opinions they’ve learned to shrink from? If they want to change the world, how will they learn to persuade people to join them?”

As Shulevitz suggests, we in the academy are not alone in our struggle to discuss topics where strong opinions vary widely. For example: Starbucks tried to foster a conversation about race earlier this spring in response to the troubling events in Ferguson and elsewhere across the country. They launched an advertising campaign and they asked baristas to write phrases like “Race Together” on customers’ orders. That effort was dismantled by the buzz saw of public opinion.

A recent article in *The Atlantic* by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, called “The Coddling of the American Mind,” takes this argument one-step further. They warn that, “Something strange is happening at America’s colleges and universities. A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.” They insist that the demand for trigger warnings and avoidance of microaggressions “presumes an extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche, and therefore elevates the goal of protecting students from psychological harm. The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into ‘safe spaces’ where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable.”

Anyone who interferes with this effort is punished, even if the interference is accidental. The authors call this impulse “vindictive protectiveness”; they believe it “is creating a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse.”

As a result, they believe the campus environment “prepares [students] poorly for professional life, which often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong . . . And [it is] bad for American democracy, which is already paralyzed by worsening partisanship.”

Voices from management theory support this concern. For example, in the *Harvard Business Review*, Jeff Weiss and Jonathan Hughes explained that: “disagreements sparked by differences in perspective, competencies, access to information, and strategic focus within a company actually generate much of the value that can come from collaboration across organizational boundaries. Clashes between parties are the crucibles in which creative solutions are developed and wise trade-offs among competing objectives are made. So instead of trying simply to reduce disagreements, senior executives need to embrace conflict and, just as important, institutionalize mechanisms for managing it.”

A recent research project by the Pew Charitable Trust also illustrates the need to discuss different points of view if society is to solve pressing global problems. The study discovered some interesting disagreements between scientists and the American public. For example 88% of scientists believe it is safe to eat genetically modified foods, but only 37% of U.S. adults agree. Maybe more pressing issues: 87% of scientists believe climate change is mostly due to human activity but only 50% of U.S. adults agree. And 82% of scientists believe growing world populations will be a major problem but only 59% of U.S. adults agree.

Is it not the very core of our mission to discuss these issues even if they may offend members of our community?

Lukianoff and Haidt state that colleges must find a way to “balance freedom of speech with the need to make all students feel welcome.” This is an admirable objective for us but we need to find our own path toward this goal.

This balance is not easy to find for any of us personally, let alone at an institutional or societal level. Early in my career when someone noticed my wedding ring, the usual question

was: what does my wife do? The question felt like a microaggression. Why would someone assume I was straight? In fact, probability would dictate that I am straight--so it was a normal assumption. I now draw the line when someone persists in calling my spouse my wife, even when I have clearly given his name. Which, by the way, still happens about 20% of the time.

Providing a welcoming and supportive campus community is a Lawrence hallmark. But we need to sustain open discourse even as we navigate a campus where difference rather than similarity is the norm. We need to study problems from multiple vantage points, even if they are ones that go against closely held beliefs. We need to assume the best of other people, and also to become more educated.

We will find this balance, together.

Last winter in an opinion piece in *The Lawrentian* a student wrote that in her experience, “Lawrence has changed me irrevocably. It has arranged and rearranged the very fibers of my being. I didn’t really know that it would when I first arrived here. . . And while my formation is not yet over, Lawrence has already made me who I am and who I will be.”

To provide this kind of transformative education we must redouble our efforts to teach and attempt to understand the provocative, the unexpected, the different from ourselves. We must also work together to create a more supportive community, and to broaden the different views we hear and learn.

In the recent song, Brave, Sara Bareilles says:
“Say what you wanna say,
And let the words fall out,
Honestly, I wanna see you be brave.”

I understand that what I am asking is not easy-- especially in today’s world. But I believe we are brave enough to take up the challenge.

Again, thank you for all you do to sustain this vibrant learning community we call Lawrence. I look forward to another year of education, growth, and celebration.