

Confronting Controversy

Colleges should nurture thoughtful debate on their campuses by establishing a designated physical space for planned discussions, led by students, about controversial topics, writes Zachary R. Wood.

By [Zachary R. Wood](#)

Many people have argued that the recent student protests at colleges and universities across the country primarily involve free speech issues. For their part, the protesters disagree, arguing that the issues they seek to address are racism, exclusivity and bigotry in all its forms -- from fecal swastikas smeared on bathroom walls to racial slurs and microaggressions.

Whatever your position is on this dispute, the one thing that has become clear is that this is an opportunity to improve the way college students debate complicated issues. The conflicts highlight that something is missing on college campuses: a designated physical space for planned discussions, led by students, about controversial topics -- those that spark heated disagreement and possibly even revulsion.

I am a minority student at Williams College, and I recently had to deal with such a controversial issue, when Uncomfortable Learning, a student group of which I am co-president, tried to bring Suzanne Venker, an antifeminist social critic, to the college. Consequently, I received a torrent of ad hominem attacks. Among other things, peers called me a misogynist and men's rights activist who was endorsing hate speech. In the end, we had to [cancel the event](#) for fear that it might get out of control and perhaps even endanger the speaker.

Yet confronting ideas that we oppose -- whether from a speaker who is brought to the campus, a senior administrator or a classmate -- is what higher education should be all about. There is a difference between Suzanne Venker and, to take an extreme example, Adolf Hitler, and to pretend otherwise undermines the principles this country was founded on. It is vitally important to create a separate area for free debate so that students who are interested can respectfully and constructively work through their understanding of sensitive issues and how to deal with them -- without being called aimless hate mongers.

Such a space is rarely available now on American campuses. Most classes in the humanities and social sciences are either lectures, seminars or a combination of the two. In each case, teachers create the course syllabi and generally set the agenda. Outside of the classroom, in dining halls, dorms and other places on a campus, students talk about various subjects. But the dining hall is a place for eating, just as a dorm is a place for living. Neither location is intended for planned discussions, for students to explore and discuss the ideas they hold.

This space I envision would serve several important purposes:

- It would give students a forum in which to clarify the issues that challenge them the most and why.
- Students could discuss the content of competing arguments on heated issues like gun rights, abortion, immigration and affirmative action.

- Students could discuss how best to respond to unwelcome ideas and offensive speech, even hate speech. After all, one person's offensive idea is another person's viewpoint.

In those respects, creating a separate space for planned discussion of controversial issues is both a way for students to engage with each other about uncomfortable ideas and to prepare each other to have conversations about any number of sensitive issues outside of that designated space.

Openly discussing controversial topics and unpleasant ideas is important because doing so can help students gain a deeper understanding of views with which they vehemently disagree. Take for example, the use of the n-word. Many African-Americans consider it decided beyond any reasonable doubt that the n-word should never be used by white people. From that perspective, white people debating the 1991 Central Michigan University case presented in Randall L. Kennedy's article "[Who Can Say 'Nigger'? ... And Other Considerations](#)" would be seen as abusive and denigrating and thus of no intellectual value.

While I am sympathetic to that point of view, I disagree with it. While some people interpret controversial comments to be attacking or devaluing of them personally, in fact many of those instances, like the use of the n-word, merit hearing opinions from all sides. Too often, certain unpleasant ideas are understood as having already been debated and conclusively decided upon. The space that I've described would give students who are interested an opportunity to have these kinds of discussions.

In particular, this space would be created by students who are enthusiastic about the idea of critically engaging with each other about the urgent issues of our time, even if they hold conflicting opinions. While they would be encouraged to defend any position they support, the discussion would ideally be driven by the participants' shared desire to gain a deeper understanding of complicated issues.

Ground Rules

To create this space, students should work with their administration to designate a place on campus where such planned discussions can occur. Once a group of students takes it upon themselves to lead this effort, they should establish important ground rules for the discussions, perhaps with the guidance of a professor or other neutral party. Ground rules are necessary to prevent ad hominem attacks and baseless claims from detracting from constructive dialogue. For example, it should be stipulated that, in the designated space, no student is allowed to attack the character of another for putting forth a controversial or even noxious argument. While there is no way of ensuring that these discussions do not engender fear of threats of physical violence, a ground rule must be established that explicitly prohibits such threats. In the extreme event that a student threatens or exercises physical violence, the administration should be notified immediately.

If some students become uncomfortable or offended by other people's opinions, they should disagree respectfully. And if they feel motivated to do so, they should try to dismantle the argument they find problematic by challenging its fundamental assumptions and exposing its flaws. "Disagreeing respectfully" does not preclude raising one's voice. Rather, disagreeing respectfully means that, in contention, students must refrain from making ad hominem attacks.

Colleges should encourage this kind of critical engagement because defending one's position, identifying flaws in arguments we disagree with and effectively communicating differences of

opinion are critical life skills. Many careers in business, politics, education and public service involve discussion of complicated issues that often result in heated disagreement. To contribute to such discussions and potentially shape climates of opinion, it is important for students to learn how to have productive conversations about sensitive topics.

Part of the reason for creating this separate area for free debate is so that it is easier for students to have uncomfortable discussions and contentious disagreements respectfully -- without causing emotional harm to others or incurring harassment or intimidation. By making this kind of forum available to students, we provide an opportunity for them to gain experience with sustained argumentation, in which students face the challenge of defending their most sacrosanct ideas against unpleasant, even deeply troubling, opposition and dealing with meaningful yet intense disagreement. While some students may leave these discussions feeling some resentment, sustained, unequivocal dissent and harsh sentiments surround the most pressing issues of our time. To debate these issues, students have to learn how to deal with the feelings that may accompany them.

These discussions are not meant to be formal debates in which opposing sides compete to win. The structure I envision is one that allows conversation to flow freely. Discussion groups, ideally, should be small enough so that students don't have to raise their hands and wait to be called on to speak. If it happens that 30 people want to be a part of the same discussion, then they can break up into small groups so that everyone has an opportunity to be fully engaged. If a situation occurs in which nine people end up disagreeing with one person, that one person should defend their ideas and debate energetically.

To ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute equally to the conversation, it might be helpful for each group to select a discussion leader. But the conversations could be most productive if those involved determined the structure for them. In that way, students would have the opportunity to play a role in shaping, framing and changing the kinds of conversations they have about controversial topics that interest them. And while all colleges should consider the idea of creating and promoting a space devoted to free debate, how that space looks in practice on individual campuses should be open to development and revision based on the experiences and suggestions of the students who are engaged in it.

Administrators and faculty members at every institution of higher learning should encourage students to see the value of free and open debate, even on issues that some people may think are already settled. Identifying an area for such debate on college campuses will help students learn how to have meaningful and productive conversations about sensitive issues, articulate and defend their opinions effectively, and learn from those with whom they vehemently disagree.