

‘Coddled’ students and their ‘safe spaces’ aren’t the problem, college official says. Bigots are.

By Ferentz Lafargue

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Williams College in Williamstown, Mass. (Courtesy of Williams College)

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In a year in which student activism and free speech issues have dominated conversations on many campuses, and beyond, a Williams College official takes on the concerns of those who argue that students today are too quick to take offense at others’ language and perceived biases.

After students object, a talk by a conservative speaker is canceled

He writes at a time when two speakers who had been invited to Williams as part of a series meant to challenge students with unfamiliar or unpopular views were canceled recently — first by students, last spring, then by the president of the elite private college in Massachusetts last month.

Williams College cancels a speaker invited as part of a series designed to bring in provocative opinions

Ferentz Lafargue is director of the Davis Center, which a spokeswoman said “strives to facilitate collaboration, dialogue and explorations for social change within the Williams College community in the hope of creating an inclusive environment for learning, living and community.” Here, he writes his views on why objecting to offensive words, attitudes and ideas is not a sign of frailty, but one of strength.

— Susan Svrluga

By Ferentz Lafargue

Welcome to the “Real World”

“The imaginary college student is a character born of someone else’s pessimism. It is an easy target, a perverse distillation of all the self-regard and self-absorption ascribed to what’s often called the millennial generation. But perhaps it goes both ways, and the reason that college stories have garnered so much attention this year is our general suspicion, within the real world, that the system no longer works.”

—Hua Hsu, *“The Year of the Imaginary College Student,” The New Yorker, Dec. 31, 2015*

In the work that I do as a diversity advocate in higher education, I hear often a concern that some of our efforts in pursuit of equity may be doing students a disservice — that we’re not preparing them for the “real world.”

The implied logic is that if students feel empowered to voice their discontent with microaggressions experienced on campus, then they’re not developing the thick skin necessary to deal with the slights they’ll see in the workplace, out in the “real world.” Students should “toughen up,” and we should stop “coddling” them, we’re told.

College president: This is not a daycare. It’s a university.

I’ve heard these sentiments expressed about the college’s efforts to counsel students against donning offensive Halloween costumes, the distribution of a “Pronouns Matter” pamphlet last fall and in more general discussions about what constitutes a “safe space” on campus.

To be sure, the real world is full of anti-Semitism, homophobia, sexism and racism. The question is: Do we prepare students to accept the world as it is, or do we prepare them to change it?

Telling students either explicitly or implicitly that they should grin and bear it is the last thing one should do as an educator. Yet that is essentially the gospel that the “wait until the real world” parishioners would have many of us adopt.

The purpose of a college experience isn’t to make students feel as if they are in a well-insulated bubble. Just as depictions of a typical college student as a video game-addicted humanities major who uses the pronoun “they” and abides by a strict gluten-free diet disregards the lived experiences of countless students, so too do any allusions that colleges are idyllic enclaves.

Enrolling at Williams for example, does not immediately reshape all students’ lives into concentric circles with Frosh Quad at their center. Instead, each student has a Venn diagram-like series of circles of their families, previous neighborhoods, schools and friend groups, all bartering for space among 2,100 other students.

Over the last five years, to help mitigate some of the tensions that are bound to arise from this complex configuration, staff members at the Davis Center have been leading workshops on social identity formation and facilitation as part of the spring and fall training sessions for Junior Advisors. These trainings are complemented by an array of events during First Days that seek to provide the entering class an introduction to the identities and perspectives they are likely to encounter at Williams.

Virtually every entering class arrives on campus better versed on issues related to gender, race and sexuality than their predecessors. Challenges posed by trying to keep up with the pace of this ever changing community partly explain why college students are such fraught discursive subjects.

Rapidly shifting demographics, an evolving language of gender and sexual identity so vibrant it would make Hilda Doolittle [a modernist poet known for challenging gender norms] proud, are but just two of the factors pushing colleges through existential dilemmas.

There are broader questions as well, such as: Is college a place for intellectual exploration? Or is it a glorified worker-training program?

We are not immune to these debates here at Williams, and some of our students and their families bear the weight more than others.

Students whose families are facing financial distress often feel guilty about engaging in any pursuit that is not alleviating their family’s hardships. The decisions these students are forced to make range from deciding whether to take time off from school to find jobs so they can better support their families to choosing majors based on projected earning expectations immediately after graduation.

Moreover, for some students these debates are about far more than college; they represent yet another variable in trying to understand how and where they fit in society.

Therefore, whether one is suspicious of the merits of college as a whole or cynical about the existence of “safe spaces,” the truth of the matter is that “coddled” college students aren’t the problem.

The real culprits — on campuses and in the real world — are the persistent effects of homophobia, income inequality, misogyny, poverty, racism, sexism, white supremacy and xenophobia.

When students refuse to accept discrimination on college campuses, they’re learning important lessons about how to fight it everywhere.

Safety and freedom can coexist, right?

1:45

While free speech is grand in the absence of active harm, argues The Post's Christine Emba, sometimes sensitivity is a virtue. (Video: Tom LeGro/The Washington Post)

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