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Inside the bubble

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Quad 136

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[◀ Previous](#) [Next ▶](#)

Inside the Bubble



Almost every college has its own version: the bubble, the cocoon, the Pine Curtain. It is the language we use to describe that unique place where students get to reside, literally and metaphorically, during their undergraduate education, though graduate students occasionally avail themselves to this world. It recognizes that college students, at least for those four special years, get to live at a remove from the “real world.” At least for the traditionally aged undergraduates, they have fewer responsibilities—no full-time jobs, less financial stress, no family responsibilities, while food, housing, transportation, recreation, social

life, etc., are all designed to meet their needs easily and conveniently. For critics, it is simply an extended adolescence, a time to continue being a teenager. But at its best, it is a time that allows for intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual growth; a time to find meaning, purpose and direction in life; a valuable stepping stone into a productive, fulfilling and meaningful adult life.

Judith Shapiro, former president of Barnard College, writing on this topic **says**, “It should not be controversial to believe that growing up involves becoming stronger, becoming better able to withstand whatever slings and arrows life throws at us and to pursue our goals even against difficult challenges. Surely the college years can and should play an important role in that growing-up process.”

But to be a meaningful interlude between childhood and adulthood, life in the college bubble absolutely cannot and should not be too comfortable. The shorthand language of “cocoon” or “bubble” does imply protection and safety and, as such, it is misleading. Almost all educators understand that to fulfill their purpose, the undergraduate years must be a time of challenges and often uncomfortable learning.

The beneficial discomfort for most students is likely to come from three sources:

1. **Leaving home.** Every student, save the occasional preppie who experienced this at boarding school, will experience being away from home and family for the first time. They will live in a community—with all the bumps and bruises and pleasures that implies: roommates, shared bathrooms, new eating arrangements, different neighbors, etc. All these little things combine to prepare students for life in a bigger professional and social world than they likely lived in growing up.
2. **Intellectual stretching.** Engagement in the classroom is what most educators think of when they refer to

uncomfortable learning. In the best liberal arts tradition, students are exposed to new and different ideas about politics, religion, gender relations, philosophy, literature, and on and on. A truly liberally educated person has explored widely and deeply and, ideally, has been made to feel uncomfortable many times in the process. Faculty should never seek to discomfit students gratuitously, but in the service of true education, uncomfortable learning is required.

3. **Social Engagement.** The discomfort engendered by living and studying with diverse peers and classmates is often the most challenging. The learning that comes from peers who are not focused on your learning and may be immature, at best, and may be inebriated, at worst, can often be among the most painful experiences in college. Students will say and do dumb things that hurt others, either intentionally or more often unintentionally. Some of these actions might require intervention from the college administration if they are dangerous or physically harmful to others, but most often they are painful emotionally or psychologically. If a student says something cruel or thoughtless about immigrants, gays, Muslims, conservatives, overweight people, Christians, Asians etc. etc. there is little the administration can or should do if we take the 1st Amendment and academic freedom seriously. This is not to diminish the pain but to recognize that these kinds of hurts are a part of being a social animal. Living as Robinson Crusoe is not an option in the modern world and to pretend otherwise does students a real disservice.

The challenge for colleges and universities is to help students understand both the significant benefits and the inevitability of uncomfortable learning, without seeming to be dismissive or unkind. A number of recent commentators think that institutions have failed in their educational responsibilities and gone too far in the direction of protection, caution and comfort. In a recent [New York Times article](#), Judith Shulevitz succinctly captures the concern in her title: “In College and Hiding from Scary Ideas.” In discussing the availability of “safe spaces” where students can go on campus to recuperate from “troubling” or “distressing” comments that might arise in public debates or presentations on campus, Shulevitz writes:

Safe spaces 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. Think of the safe space as the live-action version of the better-known trigger warning, a notice put on top of a syllabus or an assigned reading to alert students to the presence of potentially disturbing material.In most cases, safe spaces are innocuous gatherings of like-minded people who agree to refrain from ridicule, criticism or what they term micro-aggressions — subtle displays of racial or sexual bias — so that everyone can relax enough to explore the nuances of, say, a fluid gender identity. As long as all parties consent to such restrictions, these little islands of self-restraint seem like a perfectly fine idea. But the notion that ticklish conversations must be scrubbed clean of controversy has a way of leaking out and spreading. Once you designate some spaces as safe, you imply that the rest are unsafe. It follows that they should be made safer.

And the concern over too much safety extends far beyond college:

Keeping college-level discussions “safe” may feel good to the hypersensitive, 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?

Colleges and universities, as institutions of learning and communities of students and teachers, certainly should be able to handle these challenges. There are ways to both allow (and in the classroom, encourage) uncomfortable experiences that also give students opportunities to process and learn from them. A recent incident on our campuses at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University offers one small example.

A group of students gave a themed party. The theme was "Crossing the Border" and there were references to immigration and immigrants, but the details are not crucial here. The issue was that the theme was felt to be insensitive by some on campus and even hurtful by a smaller group of students. The response by our student development team was to give those offended or hurt and other supporters a public venue for expressing their concerns, to explain why they felt the party was offensive. The party givers were not punished or required to participate in any way, but the public discussion did allow them to hear the concerns of their peers. In the end, both groups learned about the responsibilities and work required to live in a community with different opinions, backgrounds and experiences.

The outcome of this incident did not result in group hugs or the singing of *Kumbaya*, but something more important resulted: all the students involved experienced some uncomfortable learning that will serve them well when they graduate from the bubble into the real world.

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