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Coddling Students?

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Uncomfortable Learning Once Again: Coddling Students?



When something on campus reaches the cover of *The Atlantic* it clearly is being noticed by mainstream society. (It may also mean the phenomenon has jumped the shark, but only time will tell.)

The cover story of the *September Atlantic* is about how students today approach challenging or uncomfortable ideas. Authors Greg Lukianoff (a constitutional lawyer) and Johnathan Haidt (a social psychologist) succinctly summarize this issue in the title: “The Coddling of the American Mind: In the name of emotional well-being, college students are increasingly demanding protection from words and ideas they don’t

like. Here’s why that’s disastrous for education—and mental health.”

The authors’ title is a reference to another academic controversy from the 1980s when University of Chicago philosophy professor Allan Bloom wrote a surprise bestseller called *The Closing of the American Mind*. In [that book](#), Bloom describes “how higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today’s students.” He argues that post-modern education, especially in the humanities, which calls into question the existence of fixed truths, makes it nearly impossible for students to seek meaning in their own lives, to seek virtue and wisdom.

Bloom was specifically criticizing the academy and the professoriate, but what Lukianoff and Haidt focus on is the behavior of students. Some have come to expect that a college education should not engender any intellectual or emotional pain, or even discomfort. As the authors write that as students seek to avoid discomfort:

*Two terms have risen quickly from obscurity into common campus parlance. Microaggressions are 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. For example, by some campus guidelines, it is a microaggression to ask an Asian American or Latino American “Where were you born?” because this implies that he or she is not a real American. Trigger warnings are alerts that professors are expected to issue if something in a course might cause a strong emotional response. For example, some students have called for warnings that Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* describes racial violence and that F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* portrays misogyny and physical abuse, so that students who have been previously victimized by racism or domestic violence can choose to avoid these works, which they believe might “trigger” a*

recurrence of past trauma.

One challenge that arises in this new world is that faculty find themselves treading lightly, self-censoring what they say and present in the classroom. “In June, a professor protecting himself with a pseudonym wrote an essay for *Vox* describing how gingerly he now has to teach. ‘I’m a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me,’ the headline said.”

Some popular comedians, like Chris Rock, no longer perform at college campuses because so many students **take offense at their jokes**.

But the most important issue for educators is how the atmosphere on campus affects student learning, and this is what *The Atlantic* article focuses on. In an attempt to protect their own emotional well-being students are seeking to make campuses “safe-spaces” that ultimately fail to educate. The authors write:

What exactly are students learning when they spend four years or more in a community that polices unintentional slights, places warning labels on works of classic literature, and in many other ways conveys the sense that words can be forms of violence that require strict control by campus authorities, who are expected to act as both protectors and prosecutors?

The current environment hurts students by teaching them to think in ways that will not serve them well in their lives outside the campus bubble.

There’s a saying common in education circles: Don’t teach students what to think; teach them how to think. The idea goes back at least as far as Socrates. Today, what we call the Socratic method is a way of teaching that fosters critical thinking, in part by encouraging students to question their own unexamined beliefs, as well as the received wisdom of those around them. Such questioning sometimes leads to discomfort, and even to anger, on the way to understanding.

But vindictive protectiveness teaches students to think in a very different way A campus culture devoted to policing speech and punishing speakers is likely to engender patterns of thought that are surprisingly similar to those long identified by cognitive behavioral therapists as causes of depression and anxiety. The new protectiveness may be teaching students to think pathologically.

The authors go on in some detail to describe the psychological harm that “coddling” students might do to them, both personally and professionally. On a personal level, “According to the most-basic tenets of psychology, the very idea of helping people with anxiety disorders avoid the things they fear is misguided.” Furthermore, “It prepares them poorly for professional life, which often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong.”

Finally, there is the harm done to the educational experience of all students, as some topics become off-limits, certain works aren’t taught and faculty emotionally dumb-down the material to match the perceived needs of the most sensitive student in the class. Self-censoring by faculty risks making a college degree not worth the paper the diploma is printed on.

Writing on this topic for *Bloomberg News*, Megan McArdle notes<

A university education is supposed to accomplish two things: expose you to a wide variety of ideas and help you navigate through them; and turn you into an adult, which is to say, someone who can cope with people, and ideas, they don't like. If the schools abdicate both functions, then the only remaining function of an education is the credential. But how much will the credential be worth when the education behind it no longer prepares you for the real world?

A college education is worth little if it does not take us outside ourselves and beyond our upbringing and communities. Students should come to college actively seeking new ideas, experiences and people. They should be seeking the discomfort that comes with real learning.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | August 24th, 2015 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).