

**Antony Davies & James R. Harrigan, Contributor**

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# Safe Spaces

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The academic year is, mercifully, nearly over. Perhaps more than any year, at least since the height of the 1960s, we could all use a break from the cavalcade of foolishness that has come from American college campuses. In just the past few months we have seen riots, mistreatment of invited speakers to the point of physical violence, shouting down of still other speakers by the permanently aggrieved, and even an organized effort to ban Chick-fil-A from a Catholic university's campus. Why? Because apparently a store that sells chicken sandwiches would render a previously healthy campus "unsafe."

In point of fact, college campuses have become very unsafe over the past few years - not to students but to ideas. It is education itself that is under threat. A certain breed of student shows up to college not ready to learn, but to teach. And as far as they are concerned, nothing should be off limits in their effort to bring the rest of their communities to heel. Don't like an invited speaker's point of view? Shout him down. Or commit an act of violence. Or start a riot. When you know with certainty that you occupy the moral high ground, after all, what tactic is off limits? Don't like the politics of Chick-fil-A's founder? Claim to feel somehow threatened. No specificity is necessary.

And it works.

Time after time, college administrators have given in to the increasingly senseless demands of their most vocal students, and it is no wonder. Despite what faculty tell themselves, colleges are transforming from educational institutions into four-year resorts, and the students are their customers. This year's nonsense is the logical culmination of that trend. The customer is always right, after all, even when the customer demands that educational institutions cease to be educational institutions.

Students, and sadly some faculty, need to be reminded that a university should be a place where all ideas can and should be vigorously debated. This requires that many points of

view receive a respectful hearing, honest consideration, and vigorous debate. Shouting down those with whom one disagrees doesn't count as any of the above. And claiming that everything one doesn't like creates an "unsafe space" is simply ludicrous.

College should be an unsafe space; that is the very point of college. Students should come with unformed and half-formed ideas, and they should subject their beliefs to four years of critical scrutiny. They should spend a lot of time with people they disagree with, and they should take seriously the possibility that between the ages of 18 and 22 they have a lot to learn.

The Chick-fil-A episode is simply a small part of a much larger problem: the transformation of higher education from a place where students can grapple with challenging and uncomfortable ideas to a place that protects students from those ideas. And until students admit that college has become far too safe, contrary to their constant complaints, that larger problem will not go away. The only way to solve it is to emerge from the soft, warm, safe cocoon of ignorance into an environment defined by relentless challenge and questioning.

But for that to happen, students will have to want to learn more than to teach. And for that to happen, they will have to admit their own ignorance. Maybe next year.

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