

# The Free Speech Crisis on Campus Is Worse than People Think

**Bradley Campbell**

Last month Samuel Abrams, a politics professor at Sarah Lawrence College, published an op-ed in the *New York Times* titled, “Think Professors Are Liberal? Try School Administrators.” Abrams, who describes himself as conservative leaning, pointed to the titles of some recent events put on by his campus’s Office of Student Affairs: “Stay Healthy, Stay Woke,” “Understanding White Privilege,” and “Microaggressions.” He described these events as politically lopsided and noted that this kind of highly politicized socialization of college students is occurring throughout the country. A lot of campus critics have pointed to the left-wing political skew of faculty, he said, and have worried about indoctrination in the classroom. But indoctrination is much more likely at campus events outside the classroom, and the political skew of administrators in charge of student life is even greater than that of faculty. (He surveyed a representative sample of 900 “student-facing administrators” and found a ratio of 12 liberals for every conservative, compared to 6 to 1 for academic faculty.)

Remember, Abrams is a tenured professor commenting about a widely discussed issue and writing about his research in the *New York Times* – America’s pre-eminent newspaper, hardly some right-wing rag. And what was the reaction at Sarah Lawrence College? Campus activists, after apparently trying to break into Abrams’s office, vandalized the office door, taking away the items he had put up, including a picture

of his newborn son, and putting up signs with statements such as “Quit” and “Our Right to Exist Is Not ‘Ideological’ Asshole.” The student senate held an emergency meeting to discuss the offending op-ed, and the college president, Cristle Collins Judd, suggested to Abrams that he had created a hostile work environment and asked him whether he thought it was acceptable to write op-eds without her approval. She also asked him if he was on the job market, perhaps as a suggestion that he should be.

## A new moral culture

If you were a time traveler from 10 years ago – maybe even five years ago– you’d probably have trouble following some of that. What’s a *microaggression*? What’s *woke*? And how could a *New York Times* op-ed lead to that kind of uproar on campus? But if you’ve been around, and if you’ve been following the happenings on American college campuses, you’re familiar by now with conflicts like this and the new moral terminology guiding the campus activists. In the last few years we’ve seen professors such as Nicholas Christakis at Yale and Brett Weinstein at Evergreen State College surrounded by angry, cursing students, with Christakis and his wife, Erika Christakis, soon leaving their positions as the masters of one of Yale’s residential colleges and Weinstein and his wife, Heather Heying, leaving Evergreen entirely. We’ve heard about *microaggressions*, said to be small slights that



Photo by Andy Ngo

over time do great harm to disadvantaged groups; *trigger warnings*, which some students demand before they are exposed to course material that might be disturbing; and *safe spaces*, where people can go to be free of ideas that challenge leftist identity politics. We've heard claims that speech that offends campus activists is actually violence, and we've seen activists use actual violence to stop it – and to defend this as self-defense – when administrators fail to do so.

These are all signs of a new moral culture. In our book *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars*, Jason Manning and I discuss how a new culture of victimhood differs from cultures of honor and dignity, and we discuss how the new culture threatens the mission of the university.

In honor cultures men want to appear formidable. A reputation for bravery, for being willing and capable of handling conflicts through violence, is important. In a society like the pre-Civil War American South, for example, a gentleman who allowed himself or his family

members to be injured or insulted might be thought a coward, someone with no honor, and lose his social standing. To avoid this, men sometimes fought duels. In honor cultures men are sensitive even to minor slights, but they handle such offenses themselves, possibly with violence.

In dignity cultures, though, people have worth regardless of their reputations. Because an insult doesn't take away your worth, your dignity, you can ignore others' insults. For serious injuries you can go to the police or use the courts. In dignity cultures, then, people aren't as sensitive to slights – they're encouraged to have thick skins – and they're not as likely to handle offenses themselves, certainly not violently – they're encouraged to appeal to the proper authorities.

But the new culture of victimhood combines sensitivity to slight with appeal to authority. Those who embrace it see themselves as fighting oppression, and even minor offenses can be worthy of attention and action. Slight, insults, and sometimes even arguments or evidence

might further victimize an oppressed group, and authorities must deal with them. You could call this *social justice culture* since those who embrace it are pursuing a vision of social justice. But we call it *victimhood culture* because being recognized as a victim of oppression now confers a kind of moral status, in much the same way that being recognized for bravery did in honor cultures.

### **What victimhood culture is *not***

Events like those at Sarah Lawrence College and elsewhere are driven by victimhood culture, and the debate over them by the clash between dignity and victimhood. Dignity culture is still dominant, so students and administrators don't shut down speakers or drive professors off campuses without controversy. But as victimhood culture advances, it's important, especially for those of us who wish to stop it, to understand what it is and what it is not.

Victimhood culture is a *new* moral culture, not simply a variant of dignity culture. Its adherents and defenders still use much of the language of dignity, as when writer Regina Rini describes the goal of microaggression reporting as "a culture in which no one is denied full moral recognition." This sounds like dignity culture, except that the implication is that even minor and unintentional slights deny people full moral recognition. The break with dignity culture is more fundamental, though. Dignity culture fights oppression by appealing to what we all have in common. Our status as human beings is what's most important about us. But victimhood culture conceives of people as victims or

oppressors, and maintains that where we fall on this dimension is what's most important about us, even in our everyday relationships and interactions. And this means that victimhood culture is ultimately incompatible with the goals of the university. Pursuing truth in an environment of vigorous debate will always involve causing offense – and one of the shibboleths of victimhood culture is that it's okay to offend the oppressors but not the oppressed. Many campus activists, realizing this, have attacked the ideals of free speech and academic freedom. One of these visions will have to prevail – either dignity culture and the notion of the university as a place to pursue truth, or victimhood culture and the notion of the university as a place to pursue social justice.

Like dignity culture, though, victimhood culture is a *moral* culture. Moral concerns and moral emotions inspire the campus activists. Their behav-

iors might appear *immoral* to those who don't share their moral assumptions, but it would be a mistake to think the activists see it that way, or to think they're in some way hypocritical or insincere. Recognizing their moral concerns helps us understand better what Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt call *vindictive protectiveness*, whereby activists are simultaneously protective toward some people and vindictive toward others. This is not a contradiction, but rather a consequence of seeing the world through the lens of oppression. Just as in an honor culture people show respect for the honorable and disdain toward the cowardly, in a victimhood culture people have empathy for victims of oppression and wrath toward their oppressors.

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Victimhood culture is a moral culture, and the activists who embrace it are moral actors, not part of a “snowflake generation” that can’t cope with disagreement. Nor are they engaging in “political theater,” as John McWhorter has suggested. “It’s one thing to find views repugnant,” McWhorter says. “It’s another to claim that – to hear them constitute[s] a kind of injury that no reasonable person should be expected to stand up to. That’s theatrical because it’s not true.” It might not be true, but the activists believe it. It’s a departure from the values of dignity culture, so it can be hard for those immersed in dignity culture to believe the activists are sincere, but there’s no reason to believe they aren’t.

That victimhood culture is a moral culture, driven by ideas about right and wrong, also means it’s not driven by general concerns about safety. In their otherwise superb new book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Lukianoff and Haidt wrongly describe the new campus culture as part of a “safety culture.” But it’s not that campus activists are afraid of taking risks; rather, they’re outraged by what they see as injustice. An example from the book’s first chapter actually highlights the difference. In the 1990s, parents began following medical advice to keep their young children away from peanuts. Peanut allergies were very rare at the time, but they could be deadly. The strange thing was, peanut allergies began to skyrocket after that. We now know this was precisely *because* children were no longer being exposed to peanuts. It turns out that early exposure to peanuts is good for most children’s immune systems.

What Lukianoff and Haidt say, correctly, is that this illustrates the principle of antifragility. As with the immune system, various kinds of adversity often strengthen us. Campus activists, like the parents protecting their children from peanuts, often embrace a myth of fragility. They believe people need protection from microaggressions and conservative speakers, lest they cause them harm.

But the parents in the 1990s weren’t fighting oppression, and the campus activists aren’t fighting peanut allergies. The 1990s parents

were following medical advice that *could* have been correct. Now that the evidence shows it’s not, parenting practices will presumably change.

To be sure, this makes for a good parable about how trying to avoid harm can cause more harm. But when the campus activists talk about harm and safety, they’re talking about the harm caused by oppression. Their concerns are moral ones, and because “morality binds and blinds,” as Haidt has told us, they won’t be easily persuaded by evidence against their beliefs. They’ve embraced a moral program that binds them to a community of fellow activists, and one that blinds them to alternative ways of viewing things. Abandoning it would require something akin to a loss of faith.

The failure to understand the new moral culture for what it is leads to an unwarranted optimism about the future of the university. This is true of many of those who are mostly sympathetic to the new culture, those who are mostly hostile to it, and those who fall somewhere in-between.

### Three kinds of optimists

First are those who support the new culture and its various moral claims. These *optimistic embracers* err in their confidence that the microaggression program, trigger warnings, and the idea of speech as violence will actually achieve what they’re intended to. The optimistic embracers include not only the campus activists themselves, but also the faculty members and journalists writing to defend their ideas – including Regina Rini, mentioned earlier, a philosophy professor who wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* defending the microaggression program and the new activist culture she calls *solidarity culture*; Kate Manne, a philosophy professor who wrote in the *Times* defending trigger warnings; and Lisa Feldman Barrett, a psychology professor who wrote, also in the *Times*, defending the idea of speech as violence.

These high profile defenses of aspects of victimhood culture should give pause to another kind of optimist, the *optimistic deniers*



who, while not supportive of victimhood culture or its manifestations, tend to treat events like the attacks on Abrams, Weinstein, or the Christakis as isolated events. They may support free speech and academic freedom while denying these things are under attack. They may dismiss campus activists as radicals who can be ignored, and the new moral concepts as passing fads.

Jesse Singal, for example, writing in 2015 about the microaggression guide used by the University of California and others, said that some administrators had simply “flown off the rails a bit in their understanding of the concept,” and he went on to dismiss the idea that microaggression complaints involved new kinds of moral claims.

Another who might fall into this category is Noah Smith, who in a long Twitter thread, denied that the attacks on free speech and academic freedom on college campuses are a serious problem, concluding that “this issue is overblown, and a distraction from more important things.”

The third type of optimist, the *optimistic critic*, has a much better grasp of what’s happening and why. These are people who have been observing campus trends and who understand the threat they pose. They tend to be advocates for the ideals of dignity, and they may even be actively involved in trying to save the university. Here the error is less in their diagnosis of the present than in their prognosis for the future.

Consider James Lindsay, who along with Helen Pluckrose and Peter Boghossian, recently illustrated how entrenched victimhood culture is in some fields by hoaxing a number of journals. They targeted fields like gender studies and ethnic studies, which they believe have become little more than “grievance studies” because of their “goal of problematizing aspects of culture in minute detail in order to attempt diagnoses of power imbalances and oppression rooted in identity.” They were successful in getting papers published in a number of journals in these fields, including one on rape culture at a dog park that concluded men should be trained more like dogs.

The study exposed the rot in some fields, but will it help? Lindsay thinks it will, writing on Twitter that he’s “virtually certain the wind has changed.” He went on: “I see the wall starting to crack. I hear the whispers. People’s quiet reactions to our project and the lack of being able to bully it out of existence are huge clues.”

Consider also Jonathan Haidt, who has done perhaps more than anyone to highlight the problems on campus. In 2015, he coauthored a journal article with five other psychologists about the problems in the field of social psychology that result from a lack of political diversity. The same year he helped start Heterodox Academy, whose goal was to promote viewpoint diversity on campuses, and with Greg Lukianoff he coauthored the *Atlantic* article “The Coddling of the American Mind,” which argued that the concepts of microaggressions, trigger warnings, and safe spaces were likely causing psychological harm to the very people they were intended to help. And Lukianoff and Haidt later expanded the argument into this year’s book of the same title, mentioned above.

Haidt wrote at the end of 2017 that he believed “2018 will be the year things begin to turn around and many more university leaders stand up and assert the values of viewpoint diversity.”

### **The problem with optimism**

The optimistic critics are right about a lot, but their optimism seems like wishful thinking. The “grievance studies” that Lindsay, Pluckrose, and Boghossian targeted are still entrenched in the universities, and those sympathetic to the fields simply dismissed the hoax as pointing to the vulnerabilities of peer review generally. The idea is that the hoaxers “could have run this sting on almost any empirical discipline and returned the same result.” Jason Manning points out that the hoax probably gave these fields’ practitioners some “momentary embarrassment, but what is that,” he asks, “against tenure, travel money, professional status, and the ability to spread your politics to the young?”

Meanwhile, people come up with novel ways to undermine the norms of scholarship

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in the name of social justice. A professor writing recently in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, for example, discusses what she sees as a dilemma: how to avoid citing the work of men who are harassers or jerks.

She even concludes that the best thing to do might be to submit revised articles according to an editor's instructions to cite certain works, and then quietly remove those citations before publication.

And what about free speech and academic freedom? The recent attacks on Abrams at Sarah Lawrence College, and the initial failure of the college president to condemn them and support Abrams, are as egregious as any of the others, especially considering the actual content of his op-ed.

What about microaggressions? The term has continued to spread. Just in 2018 are some of the ways administrators have continued to fly off the rails a bit:

- The National Science Foundation gave a grant to researchers at Iowa State University to study microaggressions in engineering programs.
- The University of Utah placed posters of microaggression statements around campus to raise awareness.
- At the University of Buffalo, microaggressions were the theme of the bullying prevention center's annual conference.
- At Harvard University's School of Public Health, students are now asked on course evaluation forms about microaggressions. Last Spring, in 43 of the 138 courses evaluated, at least one student reported hearing "verbal or non-verbal slights/insults." Administrators said they were investigating the seven professors whose courses received three or more such reports.

And even while activists and administrators concern themselves with possible minor slights against those they perceive as victims, they engage in or tolerate insults and hate speech directed toward those they per-

ceive as oppressors. There was the professor who said that a white college student tortured and killed by the North Koreans for allegedly stealing a poster "got what he deserved," and that he was just like the other "young, white, clueless, rich males" she teaches. Another professor from Rutgers wrote on Facebook, "I now hate white people." And after a group of Stanford students put "no crackers" on their community's residential bus, a staff member defended them, saying, "I hope we have no crackers here."

What's more, victimhood culture is already spreading beyond the universities, making the case for pessimism even stronger. Corporations and government agencies, even NASA, have begun doing their own microaggression training. In Multnomah County, Oregon, a recent contract between the county and the municipal workers union guaranteed that "the County and union won't tolerate any form of 'microaggression.'" And the *Times* recently hired Sarah Jeong to its editorial board despite her history of tweeting slurs against whites and men – things like "#CancelWhitePeople" and "White men are bullshit," the kind of things that are common among campus activists but were not previously part of the mainstream. And while the *Times* did distance itself from the tweets, writers at *Vox* and other left-of-center outlets defended them. Ezra Klein, for example, said Tweets like "#CancelWhitePeople" are simply calls for people to challenge the dominant power structure. And Zack Beauchamp says that "White men are bullshit" is a way of pointing out the existence of a power structure favoring white men.

The rise of a new moral culture may be hard to arrest. Articles and books won't do it, but even an organization like Heterodox Academy seems to have been ineffective in its goal of increasing po-

litical diversity at universities. And maybe there's no way it could have succeeded. John Wright discusses "the problems that inevitably accompany efforts at elevating heterodox thinking within the academy," including the fact that liberals so greatly outnumber conservatives: "The Left virtually owns the institution and a fair number of professors in the humanities and social sciences view conservatives with open contempt." But under these circumstances how can Heterodox Academy appeal to the Left without compromising its mission? Wright points out that at Heterodox Academy's recent meeting in New York last summer, 25 of the 28 panelists were left-of-center. And it showed: Among other shortcomings, "there was no mention of the rise of 'victims' programs rooted in intersectional grievances. No mention of the impact postmodernism has had on the academy. No mention of biased research areas produced by the ideological dominance of the Left, or the fact that what now counts as research in some fields is so embarrassing that Twitter accounts mock it because faculty can't or won't."

These aren't things that can be ignored while trying to fix the university's problems. It may be that these things can't be dealt with in the circumstances, but that also means any reform efforts are doomed. The obstacles Heterodox Academy faces may be insurmountable, but if so that leaves us little reason for optimism.

And if this is true – that Heterodox Academy and other reform efforts are likely to fail – too much optimism might be naïve. But it might also be harmful if it leads to complacency – to ignoring many of the real and difficult problems.

### **The problem with despair**

Of course, the danger of pessimism is that it leads to despair, which isn't really warranted either. For one thing, none of us have a crystal ball. The critical optimists could be right. Maybe things *will* turn around. Or maybe our efforts are ultimately doomed, but are helping preserve the academy for a little while longer. For all the problems with universities, they're still doing a lot of good. The natural sciences continue on, not yet wholly captured by the identitarian Left,

and as bad as the attacks on scholarship and free speech are in the social sciences and humanities, they aren't all pervasive. The randomness of the attacks is part of the problem, making them difficult to avoid even if one tries to comply with the latest leftist orthodoxy. But the randomness also means that even the most maverick thinkers aren't attacked as a matter of course. Part of what's strange about the Abrams incident is that he's been writing similar things for some time without incident. At universities all over the country, people are discussing and debating ideas – with more trepidation, perhaps, but it's usually still possible to do so. If there's any chance of preserving that, even temporarily, we should do so. We're unlikely to be successful, but it makes sense to try.

### **The strength of victimhood culture**

As we try, though, we need to recognize what we're up against. Misunderstanding victimhood culture has led critics of its various manifestations to underestimate its strength.

One reason victimhood culture is strong is that those who embrace it are sincere and zealous. If you're shocked by events like those at Sarah Lawrence College, you probably have a moral framework very different from that of the activists. Whether you're hostile to the activists, believing they're loathsome or ridiculous, or sympathetic to them, believing they're well-meaning but misguided, you're failing to grasp this important shift.

Simply condemning them, or worse, calling them names or trying to trigger them, won't help anything. Neither will simply ignoring them until things get out of hand, as at Sarah Lawrence University. If you want to save the academy, you'll need to start by offering an alternative moral vision. •

[This article was originally published in *Quillette* on November 14, 2018, and is reprinted with permission.]

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