

# Colleges' Big Fail: Protecting Feelings, But Not Speech

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The annual ritual of freshman orientation, which begins in mid-summer and extends through mid-September, is in full swing. Colleges are welcoming students and showing them around, acquainting them with classmates and college facilities, and making them aware of the full range of campus activities, clubs, and programs.

Amidst the festivities, colleges will also be introducing students to the spirit in which they should pursue their four years of study. Laudable in principle, that is bad news in practice for those who believe that the heart of college should be a properly liberal education.

While there are honorable exceptions sprinkled throughout the country, relatively few freshmen will learn at orientation that the venerable purpose of a liberal education is to transmit the fundamentals of the humanities and sciences. It also involves cultivating students' capacity to think for themselves, which is inseparable from posing—and responding to—difficult questions. And it means providing students a core curriculum that features the moral and political principles that underlie free societies.

Freshmen are unlikely to hear at orientation a straightforward account of the content and benefits of truly liberal education because most colleges and universities don't provide such an education. They cannot do so because in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, most professors and administrators are unfamiliar with its content and structure or, worse, they deny its value.

Instead, college authorities will summon bright-eyed freshman to see their education as indissolubly bound up with the pursuit of social justice, which almost always means a progressive interpretation of political reform. Typically topping universities' agenda is a focus on "sustainability," which—far from merely incorporating an exhortation to care for the environment—teaches that protecting the earth requires greatly increasing government regulation of the economy to eliminate dependence on fossil fuels.

College authorities will instruct students that oppression—based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and a proliferating variety of recently discovered conditions—lurks everywhere; that its deliberate expressions and other visible manifestations are the tip of the iceberg; and that the denial of its pervasiveness reflects false consciousness and exhibits a reprehensible resolve to hold on to unjust privilege.

College authorities will offer sensitivity training. They will impress on new students that no cost is too high to pay to avoid giving offense to fellow students as well as to staff, faculty, and administrators. The authorities will insist that professors and students can never be too vigilant because most any utterance can trigger in another person a painful memory or paralyzing fear. In addition, the authorities will note that it is up to the person who claims to be harmed and not some supposed objective standard to determine whether a remark—no matter how offhand, brief, or ostensibly benign—constitutes an act of “aggression.”

These vigilant functionaries will solemnly repeat to impressionable freshmen the oft-debunked assertion proclaimed by President Obama that one in five female college students is sexually assaulted. They will instruct students that consent must be secured at all stages of sexual activity. Students will not be told that, under pressure from the federal government, college disciplinary procedures will impose the burden on accused men to prove that they obtained consent—prove their innocence, in other words, a burden carried nowhere else in American society. Nor will students be informed that many administrators responsible for school disciplinary procedures regard basic due process protections as delusions that prevent them from doing their job, which in their eyes is to find guilty those who have been accused of sexual misconduct.

By means of these common affirmations and omissions at freshman orientation—or by the refusal to criticize the campus conventional wisdom they embody—colleges are setting the stage for the illiberal education to which they will subject students for the rest of their time on campus.

Reform, if it is to come, must proceed both from the top down and the bottom up. Some enterprising university president could make a name for himself or herself—and advance the interests of the nation—by standing against the fashions and fads of the moment and placing the defense of the principles of liberal education at the center of his or her mission. The parents and alumni who foot much of the enormous bill of higher education must overcome their complacency to demand that colleges and universities provide a genuine education for freedom.

To effectively prepare students for an education for freedom, colleges should proclaim at freshman orientation that—notwithstanding a few narrow, well-defined exceptions—liberty of thought and discussion is nonnegotiable because robust speech is essential to the acquisition of knowledge and the pursuit of truth.

Colleges should also help freshmen understand that a week that passes in which their professors do not challenge them by examining in class a provocative argument or discomfiting idea represents a dereliction of pedagogical duty on the part of their instructors and a deprivation for students of educational opportunity.

Incoming freshmen should also be told that there will be zero toleration for sexual assault; that all accusers, in addition to receiving appropriate medical care and counseling, will promptly be advised to take their accusations to the police; and that due process, starting with the presumption of innocence, is a cornerstone of American justice and is as inviolable on campus as it should be everywhere in a free society.

Having reformed freshman orientation so it provides an introduction to an education for freedom, colleges should turn their attention to the arduous undertaking involved in bringing the remainder of students' four years in college into harmony with the imperatives of liberal education.

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