

Doctoral Ceremony Commencement Address
Drexel University
June 9, 2016

The academy is founded on the free and open exchange of ideas. The ancient Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus was among the first to promote the idea of critical dialogue as a guide to truth, a notion subsequently reinforced by Plato and Aristotle. However, history reveals that robust dialogue about controversial topics does not happen automatically, and in fact is the exception rather than the norm. Medieval suppression of ideas deemed incompatible with church doctrine held sway for centuries, until finally supplanted by the Enlightenment.

The modern university is rooted in the Enlightenment ideal of the open exchange of ideas. Indeed, the academy can only function well when it fosters a robust marketplace of ideas, where frank discussions and vigorous debate are encouraged, when bad ideas are met with better ideas rather than censorship.

Moreover, like any market, the marketplace of ideas requires variability. Progress does not occur if the only people participating in a discussion already agree with one another. A healthy marketplace requires that a broad range of viewpoints are represented, including those that may be unpopular, as well as those from individuals whose voices have historically been marginalized.

Today the academy finds itself at a crossroads, attempting to balance two ideals that sometimes conflict. The first is the commitment to freedom of speech – to the open expression of ideas without fear of censorship. The second ideal is the effort to ensure that all voices are welcomed and have the opportunity to be heard.

Although these ideals need not necessarily conflict, as a practical matter they often do. The commitment to total and unfettered freedom of expression runs the risk of favoring those with the loudest voices and the tallest soap boxes. On the other hand, any effort at censorship – no matter how well intentioned or how restrained -- runs the risk of favoring one perspective over another, and begs the question of whose perspective will be privileged, and by who gets to make that decision.

Over the past three years, in an effort to ensure that their perspective is heard, some students are demanding that others with whom they disagree be silenced. With the most noble of intentions, these students argue for “safe spaces” in which ideas with which they disagree, or even that merely make them uncomfortable, are prohibited. Indeed, some insist that such a “safe space” should encompass the entire campus. For example, at universities across the country, including the University of Minnesota and the University of Pennsylvania just to give just two recent examples, public forums with visiting dignitaries have been disrupted to the point of being shut down by student protesters. At Haverford College and elsewhere,

students recently demanded the dis-invitation of commencement speakers who espoused ideas with which they disagreed. At Emory, students demanded the punishment of those who wrote in chalk the name of the current Republican presidential frontrunner on campus sidewalks, claiming that his very name made them feel “unsafe.”

Of course efforts to control speech on campus, justified by appeal to some higher good, are not new. But something very different has recently emerged. Historically, speech codes were promoted by universities themselves, and it was students who fought against them, most notoriously beginning at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964. Today, in contrast, the calls to curtail speech emanate from students themselves. This is new.

Fully armed with the expectation that they should not be made to feel uncomfortable, some students have seized the opportunity to insist on punishment of perceived transgressors in a way that is having a chilling effect on the open dialogue required by the marketplace of ideas. Consider the following example. A colleague at another university, a psychology professor with a strong record of promoting LGBT rights, recently recounted how he was subjected to an intense investigation for over a month by his university when a student accused him of “homophobia.” The incident stemmed from the student’s misunderstanding the point of a video shown in class illustrating a well-established phenomenon in social psychology concerning moral reasoning. Before the class in question was

concluded, the student had already emailed the professor's dean to loge an official complaint. Upon learning of the student's concern my colleague reached out to her, recognizing that she simply misunderstood the point of the lecture, but she refused to discuss it with him. Although eventually fully exonerated, the investigation ordeal has had a chilling effect on his teaching, and those of many of his colleagues. Such incidents are, unfortunately, increasingly common.

In response, many faculty members across the country are scrubbing their syllabi clean of controversial topics, as university administrators struggle to appease students who have come to expect to be protected from from ideas that make them uncomfortable.

Accommodation to such demands has the pernicious effect of promoting a narrative of victimhood, in which students are seen as emotionally fragile, easily traumatized, and in need of protection from ideas that are hurtful or even that make them uncomfortable. Such accommodation forces the academy, acting *in loco parentis* as "*alma mater*" (loving mother) to prioritize ensuring that students feel comfortable at all times, and to punish perceived transgressors who disrupt this sense of well-being.

Social scientists have proposed a number of interesting theories to explain this abrupt shift in the academic Zeitgeist. Highly publicized child abduction cases in the 1980s and the simultaneous advent of 24-hour cable news television

contributed to increased parental fear and protectiveness. Laws were passed that criminalized parents allowing children to do things like play unsupervised in neighborhood parks. The Millennial generation became the first to grow up under more-or-less constant adult supervision. Unlike children in previous generations who were afforded the opportunity to learn to resolve many conflicts on their own, Millennials tended to be more protected by adults, leaving many without sufficient skills to negotiate effectively in the marketplace of ideas, nor even the expectation that they should have to do so.

Another factor is the undeniable polarization of politics, fueled by changes in both broadcast and social media. It is far too easy to create an echo chamber in which one surrounds oneself exclusively with individuals who share the same values and politics. This encourages tribalism, and the demonization of “the other.” The academy has only made this problem worse by systematically excluding politically conservative voices from the faculty. Despite our commendable progress in increasing ethnic, racial, and gender diversity at the academy, we have neglected ideological diversity. History is clear that good ideas – as well as bad and even dangerous ones – have hailed from both sides of the political divide. Ideological diversity is absolutely essential to a vital marketplace of ideas.

To these factors I would add the change over the past two decades in our conceptualization of trauma. Beginning in 1980 and continuing through today, the mental health establishment has progressively altered the definition of trauma. Historically,

traumatic events were those, like war combat or rape, that were life threatening. Ordinary negative life events were not construed to be traumatic. Moreover, most (though certainly not all) individuals who experienced undeniable traumatic events were understood to be remarkably resilient, typically fully recovering normal functioning within a few days to weeks. However, the field has now promoted an expansion of the definition of a traumatic event to include virtually anything one might find upsetting. Indeed, the very definition of a traumatic event has shifted tautologically to include whatever an individual perceives as traumatic, including things as routine as hearing an off-color joke. This has fueled the idea that people are psychologically fragile and in need of protection, which in turn reinforces the narrative of victimhood. In my own research, we have found compelling evidence of the negative effects of this narrative surrounding trauma.

Regardless of the causes, the attacks on free expression have now reached a tipping point within the academy that threaten its very essence. By failing to address these issues thoughtfully and proactively, we risk two problematic scenarios. The first is a continued erosion of ideological diversity in the marketplace of ideas by ever increasing demands to prioritize avoiding discomfort above all else. But the second is a backlash in which even carefully considered efforts to regulate the most extreme and hateful speech are left unchecked, and in which marginalized voices remain unheard.

I submit that the solution lies with you.

As recipients of the highest degrees within the academy, you, the doctoral graduates of Drexel University, represent the intellectual leaders of the future. Whether working as part of a university faculty, or in industry, government, or the nonprofit sector, you will play a key role in determining how these tensions play out. This is a heavy burden, but an extraordinarily important one. After getting to know many of you personally, it is a task that I know you are prepared to assume.

So what do we do?

First and foremost, we must establish carefully considered boundary conditions for speech. The right to free speech is not absolute, and explicit threats of physical violence and intimidation must not be tolerated. Students have a right to expect a total and absolute commitment to their physical safety. In this sense, we must ensure that the entire university is, and always remains, a “safe space.”

Furthermore, we must attempt to distinguish speech that is explicitly intended merely to be hateful and intimidating from speech that reflects sincerely held beliefs. But we must recognize that there is often not a bright line separating these categories, as one person’s genuinely held beliefs may be perceived as hateful to another. When in doubt, we must err on the side of the paramount value of freedom of expression.

Most importantly, we must model how to have constructive conversations about difficult issues, without pulling punches or whitewashing, and always in a spirit of mutual respect. You are now in a position to model the kind of open discourse that is at the heart of the academy, and that is vital to a well-functioning democracy. My generation has largely neglected teaching young people how to have such hard conversations. With the best of intentions, we overly emphasized a particular ideological position at the expense of others. Our progressive self-righteousness backfired, encouraging a narrow interpretation of virtue. You, as the new generation of teachers and leaders, are in a position to correct for this bias by promoting fewer virtuous-seeming value judgments and instead fostering more open discourse.

We must encourage students and trainees to step outside their comfort zones, outside their social media echo chambers, to consider thoughtfully the full spectrum of ideas. We must instill the value of actively seeking out and considering ideas that run counter to one's established intuitions and beliefs. We must emphasize the importance of countering bad ideas with better ideas rather than censorship. We must stop patronizingly treating students as fragile children, but rather instill the expectation that they are capable of fully engaging with ideas, including those that are uncomfortable or even painful. And we must inculcate these critical values and practices in our students not merely by lecture, but by practicing them ourselves.

Doing these things will entail embracing our own discomfort that will inevitably arise when our own cherished ideas are challenged. But we owe this effort to our students, to the academy, and indeed to the vitality of our society as a whole.

I know that you, the Drexel doctoral class of 2016, are up to the challenge. You are graduating from a very special place – a university that situates itself at the crossroads of theory and practice, of academia and industry, of our campuses and our communities, of Philadelphia and the world. As such, you have developed a sense of perspective and maturity, and an appreciation for both cultural and ideological diversity, that is far too rare among your peers. I believe that you are uniquely positioned to address the profound tensions facing the academy and our democracy.

I congratulate you on this momentous achievement, I salute your accomplishments, and I welcome you as colleagues. My very best wishes as you embark on the next chapter of life.