

We Must Reverse the Infantilization of Higher Education



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Last week, I experienced the infantilization of the campus for the first time.

I run the [Center for Free Enterprise at Florida Southern College](#), where we emphasize that a realistic assessment of the world shows that free enterprise is the best way to help ordinary people. We had scheduled the well-known Manhattan Institute economist Diana Furchtgott-Roth to speak on “The Myth of the Wage Gap.” Because of that, a student targeted me for a dressing-down in my office.

Her main thrust was that the wage gap between men and women could not possibly be a myth. Everyone knows about this wage difference, she declared, so how could Diana Furchtgott-Roth call it a myth?

I encourage social inquiry based on evidence and so explained to the student how modern statistical methods can control for various influences that explain wage differences, such as education levels, area of work, and age. Furchtgott-Roth’s argument was that if you apply those controls, the “wage gap” disappears.

Our discussion then continued to fashion models who are paid very well, but, declared the student, exploited. After I explained why that conclusion was doubtful, she burst into tears and fled. It seemed her tears were a reaction to facing up to economic inquiry in an area of cherished belief.

Why does such infantile behavior surface in colleges populated by intelligent young adults?

To those of us who grew up in the 1960s, it’s strange. Students back then relished the logical articulation of heterodox ideas, but modern students, like the one mentioned above, often exhibit trauma in the face of intellectual challenge and expect administrators to protect them from conflicting ideas.

I think there’s an economic explanation for that change. We are looking at a shift in the risk preferences of the academy, especially its students.

Economists analyzing risk have long understood that most individuals prefer avoiding a loss compared with taking a gamble to achieve a gain. If faced with an equal chance of gaining or losing \$1,000 (actuarially worth \$500), most individuals are risk averse and prefer to accept a lesser sum (e.g., \$400) to avoid the gamble.

An implication of risk aversion is that people will fight to hold on to known levels of wealth, income, and other assets—including *intellectual comfort levels*. This was ever so, but students are fighting harder than ever to avoid risk of losing faith in their ideas. I think there are several reasons why this has happened.

First, higher education has greatly expanded, enrolling many students with lower ability levels compared with those of 50 years ago. In psychological research, lower intelligence is statistically associated with greater risk aversion. Therefore, one explanation for the change in risk aversion is simply that the student body has become, on average, less bright.

Second, many college administrators now have more of a commercial focus than those of the past, whose sympathies were usually close to the traditional academy. The new type has a misguided sense of the academy as really being a business (rather than simply needing to be businesslike), which leads to a customer focus that's appropriate to, say, the marketing of vacations, but not to the provision of education.

In the new model of administration, there are people who don't understand why we need all this intellectual controversy stuff. They'd rather just keep the kids happy.

Recent [research from Sweden](#) suggests that college administrators have unusually high aversion to risk. For them, any significant risk of controversy on campus with associated conflict is best avoided. Their attitude communicates in specific and general ways to the student body. A climate of avoiding intellectual conflict builds up over time. Controversial speakers become equally undesirable to students and administrators.

Another reason why many students cling to certain ideas is social media, which is increasingly a mechanism for extreme peer-group pressure if not outright bullying. Thus, the psychological loss attached to changing your ideas or in any way deviating from dominant views can be high. Social media also seems to increase risk aversion in relation to exploring ideas.

That observation rings true among growing revelations that social media networks edit information streams to align them with the exhibited preferences of users. Social media is thus an efficient medium for reinforcing belief systems via peer-group pressure. It is risky for individuals to change beliefs that have been shaped by "likes" in a public forum and the risk of ostracism through being "unfriended" is painfully high for many students.

Perhaps there are other factors contributing to the infantilization of the campus. The big question is what, if anything, we can do about it. Let me advance two ideas.

First, the inappropriate emphasis on the university as a business needs to end. When administrators look upon students simply as paying customers who must be kept happy, they lose sight of the very point of higher education, where struggling for knowledge and self-improvement is a complex undertaking. Losing enrolled students from time to time is the price of keeping academic standards high. That loss includes the possibility that some might leave because they feel "unsafe" with controversial ideas swirling around.

Second, school officials should become proactive in heading off infantilization. Administrators themselves must understand the importance of controversy and uncomfortable debate in the academy, then provide that message to the student body. It isn't enough to say that criminal damage and intimidation will not be allowed on campus. It is vital to draw students out of the sheltering approach of their earlier schooling and engage them into the world of clashing ideas where theirs will often be judged. It isn't personal. Don't react like a child.

Educational leaders must explain to students that civilization depends on freedom of speech. We need everyone's willingness to listen to and rationally respond to different views. Leaders must take every opportunity to reinforce the message that thinking based on evidence and controversy is the normal currency of academic training. Shouting down speakers is not.

That message will support wider tolerance and intellectual curiosity, and help students to take an adult approach to the world. If officials at Middlebury College had robustly encouraged this more adult approach, then their students wouldn't have shamefully shouted down Charles Murray when he tried to speak there. My college is not remotely like Middlebury, but all colleges are endangered unless we teach students that different ideas are not risks that must be avoided.