
Stop Treating Students Like Babies

They are citizens in a democracy, not infants in a nursery.



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THE REVIEW | ESSAY

By [Amna Khalid](#) and [Jeffrey Aaron Snyder](#) November 8, 2024

Donald J. Trump will return to office having won the popular vote. Many institutions of higher education are in mourning. There is good reason to be alarmed by what a second Trump presidency might hold — not just for

colleges, but for the nation and the world. Now is not the time, though, to cower in fear and retreat to designated “safe spaces.” Instead, institutions of higher learning need to turn their attention to empowering our students to contend with the reality of living in a diverse, pluralistic democracy.

We are dismayed by the administrative responses at so many colleges across the country. The McCourt School of Public Policy at [Georgetown University](#) set up a “self-care suite” with a Lego station, coloring books, and guided meditation on offer, and [Missouri State University](#) informed students they would have access to post-election counseling along with coloring pages and sensory fidgets. [Occidental College](#), in Los Angeles, was “holding space” for “processing the collective experiences of harm throughout this election cycle toward disenfranchised communities.”

A number of schools designated “dialogue circles,” “[processing spaces](#),” and quiet zones for reflection. The [University of Puget Sound, in Washington](#), created a “Recharge Room” with puzzles and craft supplies, while also organizing a “Pause for Paws” event for students to spend time with “furry friends.” [Virginia Tech](#) set up a self-care circuit for students “to relieve stress and express yourself,” while their campus therapy dog held “pawfice” hours for students on November 6. In light of the election results, many professors across the country, including at [Harvard](#), the [University of Pennsylvania](#), Columbia University, and Barnard College, canceled classes or made them optional, rescheduled exams, and modified course requirements.

This is not what students need. It doesn’t behoove educational establishments to signal to their students that they are fragile and must attend first and foremost to “self care.” To the

contrary, this is the time for colleges to realize how disconnected their communities are from the realities of the majority of Americans who voted for Trump. This is the moment when we should abandon infantilizing therapeutic approaches to college education. This is the moment for equipping our students with the tools they need to understand and engage with difference. This is the moment for higher education to own up to fostering echo chambers.

The students are not to blame. For too long, administrators and faculty members alike have encouraged self-righteous navel-gazing, creating conditions under which many students have become alienated from the daily lives of ordinary Americans.

The despondency and dejection coursing across college campuses is a sign that we need to do things differently. Here are five suggestions — or actionable items, to use the neoliberal parlance of our times – for what institutions can of higher learning should do:

- **Take this moment to emphasize that it is imperative not to demonize those different from us but at the very least try to understand them.** This is the first step in overcoming the chasm between our predominantly liberal campuses and the millions of Americans who do not share our politics. We can do something like what Jonathan Zimmerman, a history professor at the University of Pennsylvania, did after Trump's first win in 2016. He [organized an in-person discussion between Penn students](#) and students at Cairn University (formerly known as Philadelphia Bible College), where the student body leans heavily Republican. For two hours, students had productive, civil, and eye-opening conversation. Several Penn students later noted that they had never spoken with a Trump supporter before and were taken aback by the amount of common ground they shared.

More ambitiously, colleges can add to the suite of off-campus studies programs focused on immersive learning in different countries by offering exchange programs for students from urban, predominantly liberal schools to interact and learn from students in conservative, rural America, and vice versa. Rural America is in many ways a

foreign country for many of our students. Liberal and conservative students alike would benefit from stepping outside their bubbles.

- **Colleges will do right by their students by abandoning approaches to diversity that depict minority communities as monoliths.** This election demonstrated clearly that racial and gender identity are only one part of what informs political decision-making. Trump's appeal to Black and especially Hispanic men upends the reductive discourse of [DEI, Inc.](#) identity politics. Minority groups are made up of individuals who are just as diverse and complex as the majority.

Flat, simplistic approaches to diversity impede our students' ability to understand the world as it actually *is*. When we fail to help students appreciate the many facets of human existence and behavior, it's little wonder that they are shell-shocked by the election results. Trafficking in simplistic frameworks that erase or obscure complexity does a real disservice to our students.

- **Higher education ought to take this moment to educate our students about the importance of material conditions and circumstances.** Class matters, despite being conspicuously absent from conventional DEI frameworks. We turn away from this truth at our peril. Real politics and social justice are not about changing words. Remember "[Latinx?](#)" Four percent of Latinos [use](#) this term. Forty-five percent of Latinos voted for Trump.

We recommend Musa al-Gharbi's new [book](#) *We Have Never Been Woke* as a common reading for colleges and universities. Al-Gharbi offers a most incisive analysis of the political economy of the knowledge sector, arguing that conceptions of social justice (or "wokeness") are a form of cultural capital among contemporary elites. These frameworks of social change seldom, if ever, benefit the minorities they purportedly care about. Rather, they further tokenization by helping only the elites of minority communities gain a place at the table. Those who are genuinely vulnerable and disadvantaged remain marginalized. This explains, at least in part, why so many liberals on college campuses are surprised by the demographic makeup of Trump supporters. It's time colleges, especially the elite ones, teach students that material conditions matter.

- **We need to recommit to the humanities and historical learning.** This generation of students came of age when Trump first came to power. Their understanding of politics has almost exclusively been shaped by the Trump phenomenon, which has dominated public discourse since 2015. When liberals and Democrats keep repeating the apocalyptic message that Trump will end democracy as we know it, we would do well to emphasize the study of the past to see that people are resilient and that we have survived much, much worse.

To that end, it is also important to recognize that Americans can learn something from other countries. The inward worldview steeped in American exceptionalism is preventing us from seeing the many ways in which other societies have dealt with authoritarianism. This is not the time to nix the humanities and foreign-language departments where students acquire these skills, but to bolster and buttress them.

- **Finally, we have a responsibility to teach students that there are no instant fixes to social and political problems,** an attitude that has been encouraged by campus DEI offices' drive-thru diversity-training version of social justice. A culture that puts a premium on convenience, immediacy, and pat solutions robs people of the tenacity, commitment, and deep engagement that are essential for bringing about social change.

We would do well to help our students unlearn the idea that everyone will end up thinking like us if only they get their heads straight. If we approach talking across difference as only a matter of convincing people to convert to the "right" view, then our goal is a dystopia where there is no room for dissent or disagreement. As Ralph Ellison observed in the 1960s, "The diversity of American life is often painful, frequently burdensome, and always a source of conflict, but in it lies our fate and our hope."

We cannot be defeated in the face of setbacks, not least because there is so much cause for concern. The insecurity and vulnerability that groups like DACA, LGBTQ+ and immigrant students face is real. It is vital that we do all we can to support and protect them. In addition, the incoming Trump administration will surely try and undermine the

integrity of public higher education. We should expect to see more chilling laws in the [Stop WOKE Act](#) vein.

To deal with the many daunting challenges that lie ahead, we need to cultivate in ourselves and our students the strength, stamina, and fortitude that this difficult work requires. It's precisely when the risks are high that we need to double down and get to work. The mission to promote critical thinking and civic engagement has never been so vital.

Read other items in this [What Will Trump's Second Victory Mean For Higher Ed?](#) package.

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