

Civic Education and Speech in the College Classroom

HARRY BRIGHOUSE*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	957
I. THE CIVIC MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION.	958
II. WHAT SHOULD BE THE CIVIC MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION? . .	960
III. DO COLLEGES FOSTER DELIBERATIVE RESPONSIBILITY?	964
IV. TEACHING IS THE PROBLEM	967
V. SUGGESTIONS	969
VI. CONCLUSION	974

INTRODUCTION

Under pressure from legislators, the 13-campus University of Wisconsin System recently surveyed students on their views about free speech and their experiences relating to speech on their campus and in their classrooms. More than 10,000 students responded, enough to provide some sort of picture of the state of the classrooms on the campus.

The results specifically concerning student experiences in the classroom are consistent with a much smaller but national survey conducted by *intelligent.com*. That survey targeted students who self-identify as moderate, conservative, or liberal, and found that 52% of respondents “say they ‘always’ or ‘often’ refrain from expressing views on political and social issues in classrooms out of concern for potential consequences,” with conservatives only very slightly more likely than moderates and liberals to testify to self-censorship. Conservatives and moderates are more likely than liberals to fear losing the respect of their professors or a cost to their grade, but, for all three groups, concern that their peers would lose respect for them was either the top, or joint top, reason given for keeping quiet.¹

* Harry Brighouse is Mildred Fish Harnack Professor of Philosophy and Carol Dickson Bascom Professor of Humanities at University of Wisconsin-Madison. © 2024, Harry Brighouse.

1. *Half of College Student Surveyed Fear Expressing Their Ideas in Classrooms*, INTELLIGENT (Sep. 8, 2001), <https://www.intelligent.com/college-students-fear-expressing-ideas-in-classroom/> [<https://perma.cc/J9HA-G6N7>].

As far as I know, there is no longitudinal study of how students feel about speech in the classroom. So, we don't know how the experiences, concerns, and behaviors of students today compare with those of their predecessors in 2000, 1980, 1968, or 1955. Perhaps there has been little change. Whether there has, or not, though, the snapshot seems, on the face of it, to give cause for concern.

Without texture, one can dismiss the survey responses as not revealing anything very worrying. Most students are young, still learning how to think and what they value, and therefore they *should* be hesitant about expressing their views about controversial matters in a classroom environment. It is to their credit that they are concerned about the effects of their speech on others. It shows that they understand that speech *matters*. And what if the views they withhold are offensive? If someone holds, for example, racist views, it would be better if they didn't, but, given that they do, refraining from expressing them is one of the better choices they could make. If the surveys just reveal that a certain level of thoughtfulness and consideration for others is widespread among our students, then we should, perhaps, be celebrating the findings.

I am going to try to convince you that the surveys should not be interpreted so benignly and that, in fact, college classrooms are, on average, suboptimal in specific ways that are suggested by the surveys. Arguing for this will require invoking—and defending—a civic mission for undergraduate education, which I will do in the next two sections. After this, I will explain why I interpret the survey results non-benignly by looking at them in a little more detail and providing some specific examples of inhibited student speech. Then I will argue, briefly, that the best way of looking at the problem is by thinking about *instructor skill*. I argue that instructors are, for the most part, not optimally equipped to teach toward the civic purposes I identify. In particular, they are not equipped to manage speech in the classroom well. I conclude the paper with tentative suggestions for how college leaders, how college teachers, and (very briefly) how college students can help to mitigate the problems revealed.

I. THE CIVIC MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The idea that college education has a distinctive civic mission, one that goes beyond preparing students to be effective participants in the economy, has a long pedigree in the United States. John Adams wrote the following into the Massachusetts Constitution in 1780:

Wisdom, and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislatures and magistrates, in all future periods

of this commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them; especially the university at Cambridge.²

Much later, very early in the post-war expansion of colleges and universities, the 1947 Presidential Commission on Higher Education endorsed a civic mission:

... the President's Commission on Higher Education has attempted to select, from among the principal goals for higher education, those which should come first in our time. They are to bring to all the people of the Nation:

- Education for a fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living.
- Education directly and explicitly for international understanding and cooperation.
- Education for the application of creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems and to the administration of public affairs. . . .

Education is by far the biggest and the most hopeful of the Nation's enterprises. Long ago, our people recognized that education for all is not only democracy's obligation but its necessity. Education is the foundation of democratic liberties. Without an educated citizenry alert to preserve and extend freedom, it would not long endure."³

Statutory law specifies the University of Wisconsin system's remit:

The mission of the system is to develop human resources, to discover and disseminate knowledge, to extend knowledge and its application beyond the boundaries of its campuses and to serve and stimulate society by developing in students heightened intellectual, cultural and humane sensitivities, scientific, professional and technological expertise and a sense of purpose. Inherent in this broad mission are methods of instruction, research, extended training and public service designed to educate people and improve the human condition. Basic to every purpose of the system is the search for truth.⁴

Go to the mission statement page of a selective college or university, and you will almost certainly find echoes of some of these ideas in the language therein.⁵

2. MASS. CONST. pt. II, ch. V, § II. The final phrase refers to Harvard University from which Adams graduated.

3. TRUMAN COMM'N ON HIGHER EDUC., HIGHER EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY: A REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT'S COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION 8, 25 (1947).

4. WIS. STAT. § 36.01(2).

5. *Mission, Vision & History*, HARV. COLL., <https://college.harvard.edu/about/mission-vision-history> [<https://perma.cc/4QXL-F4K7>] (last visited Apr. 3, 2024).

The idea that colleges and universities have some sort of civic mission that goes beyond simply benefiting the students themselves and enhancing their contribution to economic productivity is pervasive in higher education circles.

II. WHAT SHOULD BE THE CIVIC MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

It is reasonable to think that schooling might have a role in producing competent citizens. For liberal democratic institutions to succeed requires that a critical mass of citizens engage with them in the right kinds of way, and the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions of good citizenship do not come naturally. We have reasons to believe that, left to their own devices, families may underinvest in this aspect of their children's education (because the main beneficiaries of competent citizenship are not those who possess it but those who are on its receiving end), and some of the relevant characteristics may be very difficult to develop outside of school (especially given how much time children already spend in school for non-citizenship related reasons).

Ideally, those characteristics would be fostered adequately by compulsory education, which is universal, leaving no need for higher education, in which only about 50% of the population,⁶ who are on average relatively advantaged, participate.⁷ But conditions are not ideal, and compulsory education does not seem to be sufficient. How should we think about the civic mission of higher education in our, non-ideal, circumstances? I am not going to offer a context-invariant answer to this question. Instead, I want to suggest a method for working out what the mission should be—what, in practice, colleges and universities should do—which I will then explore in the United States context. The method is this: try to identify imperfections in the formation of citizens that are particularly important for the functioning of the actual institutions, and that we have reason to think universities and colleges are reasonably well-positioned to mitigate without unachievable changes in the way that they operate. In some liberal democracies, this method might lead us to conclude that, in fact, higher education should not have a civic mission (beyond simply encouraging students to be mostly law-abiding and reasonably decent as managers and employers). If, for example, a democratic system is functioning reasonably well and the higher education system is both highly elite and hyper-specialized, as, for example, in the UK between the 1920s and quite late into the expansion of the 1960s (or, possibly, even into the expansion of the 1990s), we might conclude that higher education cannot contribute much.

I want to suggest that the situation in the contemporary United States is not like that. Liberal democratic institutions have identifiable challenges that it is

6. Michael T. Nietzel, *Percentage of U.S. Adults With College Degree Or Postsecondary Credential Reaches New High, According to Lumina Report*, FORBES (Feb. 1, 2023), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelt Nietzel/2023/02/01/percentage-of-us-adults-with-a-college-degree-postsecondary-credential-reaches-new-high-according-to-lumina/> [https://perma.cc/WJP4-896P].

7. See CHRISTOPHER MARTIN, *THE RIGHT TO HIGHER EDUCATION: A POLITICAL THEORY* 3–9 (2021).

reasonable to think that institutions of higher education, without major structural changes, could contribute to mitigating.

Maybe it is helpful to start with some challenges that I do not think higher education can do a great deal about, at least directly. High levels of material inequality, considerable racial and socio-economic segregation, and very poor educational prospects for a large fraction of children who grow up in neighborhoods blighted by high concentrations of disadvantage are all outside the remit of higher education. Colleges and universities can train teachers, nurses, social workers, dental hygienists, public health professionals and doctors, and, by performing that role well, can indirectly benefit people on the receiving end of these social ills, but they cannot directly contribute much to the structural reforms that would eliminate or severely reduce the extent of those problems.

By contrast, colleges and universities are well placed to mitigate a different kind of challenge, which I will call “the problem of deliberative responsibility.”⁸

States influence the lives of denizens mainly through coercive measures. In times of low-conflict, the coercion is generally soft: most people comply with most of the rules most of the time, so the coercive apparatus does not often come to the surface in most people’s lives. But coercion nevertheless stands behind the rules, as it has to if institutions are to be robust against potential disrupters. So, when we vote—or otherwise try to influence government decisions through campaigning, donating to candidates, or standing for office ourselves—we are calling on the state to command others to do our will and to use coercive means to ensure compliance if necessary. When we impose our will on others, we are morally required to take their interests, as well as our own, into account, and to offer them reasons and justifications for our choices.

Democracies facilitate such reason-giving and interest-considering—insofar as they do it at all—through the design of a deliberative infrastructure. Here is an idealized, partial, description of what happens: political candidates formulate and offer political platforms, and can be held accountable through regular opportunities to eject them from office. Public spaces, including broadcast media, newspapers and magazines, provide more or less reliable information pertaining to salient political issues and operate mechanisms through which representatives of political parties advertise their policies and make their case. Elected representatives engage in publicly accessible deliberations about the issues, so that better decisions can be made but also so that citizens can be assured that their interests are considered and can track the reasons being offered. In civil society, citizens interact in ways that enable them to discern one another’s interests and offer reasons informally.

Of course, all of this is realized imperfectly even in the best of circumstances. And, even when the institutions give optimal support for this process, success probably requires that a critical mass of citizens exercise what I call deliberative

8. See Harry Brighouse, *Deliberative Responsibility and Civic Education in Universities and Colleges in the US*, in *LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION: A PARADIGM IN CRISIS* (2022).

responsibility. That is: they are inclined to discern, and take good account of, the interests of others, and to offer reasons to them for their choices, and those inclinations are accompanied by the requisite levels of skill at doing so.

The contemporary United States is not the best of circumstances. The symptoms are easy to discern. The two political parties are highly polarized. Compared with previous generations, there is remarkably little overlap in voting records of elected officials not only at the Federal level but even at state levels. Technological change has eroded both broadcast media and newspapers, which have been replaced by narrow-cast media and so-called social media on the internet, so that citizens are increasingly drawn to epistemic bubbles in which their predispositions are confirmed rather than challenged. If there ever were many high-quality models of engaged and responsible deliberation available on television or radio, few are available now, and very few are in locations where they would be stumbled upon by someone not seeking them out. Those who are highly politically engaged and active are unlikely to do.

It is unsurprising, then, that levels of distrust between supporters within the main political parties are remarkably low. Counties are increasingly solidly Republican or solidly Democratic; when people move, they tend to move to places where their political affiliations are widely shared. But, while racial, religious, and cultural tolerance have all increased markedly over the past fifty years, tolerance of supporters of the opposing party has declined dramatically. A poll asking adults whether they would be ‘disturbed’ if their child married a member of the opposing political party in 1960 found that fewer than 5% of supporters of either party would be; that number rose to about 50% in a 2018 poll.⁹ According to a recent survey, the extent to which Democrats and Republicans see members of the opposing party as “immoral” rose substantially from already high levels between 2016 and 2022:

In 2016, about half of Republicans (47%) and slightly more than a third of Democrats (35%) said those in the other party were a lot or somewhat more immoral than other Americans. Today, 72% of Republicans regard Democrats as more immoral, and 63% of Democrats say the same about Republicans.”¹⁰ The same poll found that “72% of Republicans and 64% of Democrats say people in the opposing party are more dishonest than other Americans. . . Large majorities in both parties also describe those in the other party as more closed-minded than other Americans (83% of Democrats and 69% of Republicans say this).”¹¹

9. Isabel Sawhill, *What the forgotten Americans really want—and how to give it to them*, BROOKINGS (Oct. 2018), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-the-forgotten-americans-really-want-and-how-to-give-it-to-them/> [https://perma.cc/L86V-2QSR].

10. See *As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (Aug. 9, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/> [https://perma.cc/FHJ3-Q4LJ].

11. See *id.* at 6–7. Note this study is about how Democrats and Republicans see “people in the other party,” not politicians in the other party.

Mutual distrust is implicated in, and reinforced by, political outcomes. In 2016, 63 million Americans voted for a Presidential candidate who advertised his ignorance, his bigotry, and his contempt for democracy throughout his campaign. In 2020, 74 million voted for that same candidate who, by then, had ensured that no attentive and informed voter could be in doubt that he would, if he could, overturn the outcome of the election, however legitimate that outcome, if it went against him.¹² The election was challenged, despite a complete absence of any evidence at all for its illegitimacy. Eight of the 100 US Senators cast votes to overturn the results. As many as 139 out of 435 members of the House of Representatives voted the same way.

It would be naïve in the extreme to look to educational institutions as ‘the solution’ to any problem in which other institutions are so deeply implicated. But we have several reasons for thinking that universities and colleges are well placed to *mitigate* the problem of deliberative responsibility.

First, most traditional-age students, when they start college, enter an environment that is more diverse on numerous dimensions than any they have inhabited beforehand. Colleges and universities are not, of course, as diverse as the country as a whole, but because neighborhoods (and therefore schools from kindergarten through 12th grade) are *so extremely* segregated by socio-economic class, race, and even political affiliation, most colleges and, even more so, most residential colleges, are more diverse on all those dimensions than the neighborhoods and schools from which their students come. Most of those students are, for the first time, living apart from their families, and usually primed to some extent to develop opinions and perspectives that are genuinely their own. This diversity and those attitudes can, in principle, be harnessed to foster deliberative responsibility.

Second, the undergraduate courses of study embedded in American colleges and universities have a common and unusual character. Whereas undergraduate degrees in most countries involve intensive study in one academic area, American undergraduates are required to study a broad range of areas in addition to their chosen area of specialty. A student in another country might study Physics, or Mathematics, or Philosophy, or Industrial Engineering, or German, or Accounting and *only that*.¹³ But a United States student majoring in Physics or Mathematics or German will usually be required to take a wide range of courses in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, as well as fulfil a language requirement. And even the professional schools where they might study Accounting or Industrial Engineering typically require that they take general education courses that expose them to other disciplines quite unrelated to their main area of specialty. The availability of general education and liberal

12. Contrary to how it might appear, I am not criticizing them for voting for him. I am sure that many millions of those who voted for him, thus presumably thinking that voting for him was justified, also found it appalling that he was the candidate they preferred.

13. They might choose to study two areas, but typically that choice is highly constrained, and those areas are cognitively linked. One might be permitted to study history and economics, or physics and mathematics, but not physics and economics or history and mathematics.

arts breadth requirements provides a mechanism through which colleges can, in principle, direct students to classes which facilitate the habits and skills needed for deliberative responsibility.

The third feature is that colleges and universities are relatively unaccountable to the kind of forces that would prevent them from facilitating deliberative responsibility. Preachers must cater to their congregations; newspapers to their readers; TV and radio broadcasters to their advertisers and politicians to their bases. Careful, mutually respectful, deliberation is not, it seems, strongly supported by those particular markets. But universities and colleges inhabit extremely imperfect market conditions, and the reasons students choose them are hardly related at all to their facilitation of deliberative responsibility. On the most optimistic story, students are seeking high quality instruction in a range of disciplines embedded in a residential experience through which they can grow as well-rounded persons. A more cynical story emphasizes their future income-earning and job prospects as well as the quality of the social experience while they are studying. And, of course, some students have very limited choices either because they are not very academically competitive or because they have limited resources and want to attend a (usually public) institution that is inexpensive and near their family homes. In all these cases, universities are insulated considerably from the kinds of market forces that would make it difficult for them to facilitate deliberative responsibility. Even public institutions, even in States with legislatures that are inclined to interfere considerably with their operations, are, for now at least, reasonably secure.

III. DO COLLEGES FOSTER DELIBERATIVE RESPONSIBILITY?

I am going to give a very general, and brief, account of how colleges might deliver on the mission of fostering deliberative responsibility. I will reserve more concrete suggestions for actionable change, which anyway have to be sensitive to particular institutional contexts, to the final section. The basic idea is suggested by the affordances that I've referred to in the previous section: colleges can harness the diversity (and in particular the political diversity) of their students, use the freedom they have from market and polarization pressures, and designate several elements of general education and/or liberal arts requirements for the specific purpose of fostering the skills and dispositions that are involved in deliberative responsibility.

Let us start with the classes. It is possible to require classes which focus on controversial and contemporary political or moral issues thus providing students with opportunities to practice giving and taking reasons, hearing and thinking through the perspectives of others, and presenting their own reasons and arguments in ways that invite others to listen and consider, and in which the modelled aim is to come to a better understanding of one's co-respondents and their views, rather than to get them to share one's own. Some of these pedagogical outcomes might be achieved through classes which do not actually focus on morally or politically inflected issues because there are many topics on which people can

fruitfully disagree: how best to design a sociological study; how best to prove a mathematical theorem; how best to interpret Shakespeare's Sonnet #18, or how to put it to music. But, especially given the reluctance many students have to reason across disagreements about politics, and the paucity of high quality models for doing so, it is easy to imagine that without some explicit modelling, facilitation, and practice of that specific activity few are unlikely to become proficient in it.

Now, let us think about what would happen in those classrooms. Professors would be careful to ensure that the full range of relevant and reasonable perspectives would come out in class discussions. Students would feel able to think (carefully and maybe cautiously) aloud, confident that their classmates and teachers would impute good intentions and that they would be interpreted charitably by all parties and not held accountable for imperfections in their phrasing. Nobody would be hypervigilant for deviation from some accepted set of commitments, and everybody would know that nobody else was going to be hypervigilant. Students would be tolerant of one another so that errors, including moral errors, would be easily forgiven. Teachers would be skilled at correcting errors, including moral errors, without shaming perpetrators or deterring future student speech.

Is this what our classrooms are like? The survey evidence that I mentioned briefly in the introduction suggests: not always. Indeed, it might not even *often* be what happens in our classrooms. It is remarkably hard to find high quality and systematic evidence of political bias on the part of teachers.¹⁴ But the UW System survey found, for example, that very liberal and somewhat liberal students perceived that their instructors encouraged diverse viewpoints in the classroom to a much greater extent (73% and 69%) than did somewhat conservative and very conservative students (42% and 34%).¹⁵ In classrooms where viewpoint diversity is relevant, only 28.5% of Republicans and, perhaps more strikingly, only 46.6% of Democrats and *only 47.2% of very liberal students* believed that students with unpopular views would feel comfortable expressing them.¹⁶ 60% of Republican students and, again strikingly, as many as 19.7% of Democratic students have felt pressured by an instructor to agree with a specific view, and 40% of the Republicans who expressed that experience said that they have felt pressured often, or extremely often.¹⁷

My own non-scientific surveys and many personal conversations with students suggest how this kind of pressure is experienced. A (very) liberal student (approvingly) described a professor on the first day of class saying, "I'm a very liberal

14. As I will describe in the next paragraph, it is easy to find stories of bias, and because many of the stories I have found are directly from my own students whom I regard as reliable witnesses, I believe professor bias isn't especially rare. But neither academics nor journalists—even hostile journalists—seem to have gathered systematic evidence, and I presume this is not for want of trying.

15. April Bleske-Rechek et al., UW SYSTEM STUDENT VIEWS ON FREEDOM OF SPEECH, SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESPONSES 54 (2023).

16. *Id.* at 57.

17. *Id.* at 59.

professor, so if you're a conservative you might want to drop this class now." A conservative student told of a class in which she felt she had established a good relationship with the professor, but that, from the first time she turned up in her ROTC uniform, the professor stopped talking with her. Another student was routinely put on the spot by a professor in a smaller class: "You're the only Republican in the class: what is your view of this issue?" Here is another story:

I have experienced multiple occasions, across many fields of study and course difficulties, wherein professors have made comments about not only conservative public figures and politicians, but made harmful blanket statements about conservative individuals in society. For example, one such disparaging statement made by a tenured professor was that 'the only reason conservative Americans hated Obama was because he was black.'

As the survey data suggest, it is not only—and probably not mainly—professors who make students reluctant to articulate their views, but instead classmates and the assumption that if classmates are judgmental the professor will not say anything. One student (a left-wing student of color) reported what happened in a class on the Literature of Protest. The student asked the professor whether they would be studying any conservative literature of protest; a classmate whispered loudly that "anybody asking that is racist," and the professor said, blankly, that there was no conservative literature of protest.

As I said in the introduction, without context and texture, the survey results might be interpreted as revealing that students are merely appropriately reticent about articulating unformed or genuinely offensive beliefs. The vignettes above suggest, unfortunately, that this is not all—or possibly not even *mainly*—what is happening. Students (conservative, liberal, and undecided) refrain from articulating well-thought out and reasonable ideas because they fear social censure from their peers and, sometimes, from their instructor.

Does this really matter? One reason it matters is rather simple: to the extent that the perceived threat of social censure is real, and to the extent that instructors and students actually impose it, they, especially the instructors, are wronging the censured. Students have a right to be treated well in a classroom, and to be given as much consideration as others. Instructors have a duty not only to treat their students with respect, but to create an atmosphere in the classroom in which mutual respect prevails.¹⁸

18. For what it is worth I have, at least once, failed abjectly in this duty. I taught a class in which a group of (graduate) students policed the speech of their peers and of the undergraduates in the room through use of body language and hypervigilance. They were seriously wronging the other students in the class. I am not sure I was wronging the other students, but I certainly failed them. The fact that they had sympathy with, and supported, me does not excuse my failure. This was a class, I should add, in which most of the students, including all of the students who were policing and all who were policed, were politically considerably to the left.

But that is not the reason that is most pertinent to the civic mission. Several things happen when students self-censor excessively, all of which limit the development of deliberative responsibility. The range of reasons that students are able to consider is artificially restricted, reducing the usefulness of the classroom as a space to develop deliberative skills. Students who are inhibited from speaking do not learn how to present their ideas concisely and precisely and in an inviting manner. Some of those same students sometimes develop a sense of resentment, limiting their own inclination and ability to take seriously views that contradict their own.¹⁹ Those students whose ideas prevail in the particular classroom have their own ideas reinforced and lose out on the opportunity to rethink them in the light of authentic and reasonable challenges from people they know in an environment of trust. They do not learn that their reasonable and decent peers disagree with them, so that, when they encounter reasonable but unexpected challenges beyond the classroom, they are less likely to understand that those challenges are reasonable and sometimes come from decent people.²⁰

IV. TEACHING IS THE PROBLEM

How should we think about this problem? Sometimes—as in both of the surveys I have appealed to—it is associated with other phenomena, such as questions about when it is appropriate to disinvite campus speakers, ‘cancel’ culture, and student understandings of and attitudes towards the First Amendment, under a broad heading of “free speech.” It is, indeed, associated with those phenomena, but I think it is sometimes helpful to consider it in isolation because classroom speech occurs in a space that is overseen and controlled by particular people with particular pedagogical duties.²¹ My thought is this: faculty teaching politically and ethically inflected issues lack necessary skills and a professional ethic concerning what their aims should be, and both those deficits can be addressed through purposeful action.

Let us start with the skills. In general, we have good reason to suspect that teaching in higher education is suboptimal. The reasons are simple. Teaching well is difficult, requiring not just knowledge of one’s discipline, but understanding of how students think, the mistakes they commonly make, and how to induce them to work hard in the ways that will result in their learning. Second, most faculty members, particularly at selective colleges, were not trained to teach, were hired for their success or potential as researchers, not teachers, and lack both

19. Adam S. Hoffman, *My Liberal Campus Is Pushing Freethinkers to the Right*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 1, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/01/opinion/campus-conservative-freethinkers.html?searchResultPosition=1>, [<https://perma.cc/4B98-4BXJ>].

20. For pretty much every reasonable—indeed pretty much every true—morally and politically-inflected claim only some of the people who express it are decent.

21. For a brief discussion of why it is a mistake to think about speech in the classroom under the heading of “free speech” see Harry Brighouse, *Citizenship Education and Speech in the College Classroom: What’s the Real Problem*, 27 INDEP. REV. 381–89 (2022). The current essay develops several themes from that one.

incentives to become better teachers and an infrastructure through which to learn.²²

To make things more difficult, the teaching we are focusing on is not teaching of any discipline, but teaching the skills and attempting to induce the dispositions that will prepare students for responsible citizenship. Faculty are not well prepared to teach their disciplines, but they are really not well prepared to teach students how to deliberate carefully and responsibly together about morally and politically inflected current issues about which reasonable and morally decent people are bound to disagree, such as whether abortion is morally permissible, how education and health care should be distributed, or the extent to which and ways in which governments should regulate and mitigate the effects of markets in the economy. Carl Weiman observes:

The most basic principle that every teacher should know about teaching. . . is that the brain learns the thinking that it practices, but little else. To have students learn to recognize relevant features and make relevant decisions more like an expert in the field, they must practice doing exactly this. The longer and more intense the practice, the greater the learning.²³

When it comes to the skills needed for democratic citizenship, reading or listening to someone talking about those skills is not practicing. When students are learning the skills needed for respectful and engaged deliberation across disagreement, there is no substitute for discussion.

But for discussion to do the work of developing the skills, it must be well-structured and well-moderated. Lacking the skills required to make controversial discussions productive, instructors often fall back on their own talk, as Derek Bok explains:

Teaching by discussion can also seem forbidding because it makes instructors uncomfortably aware of their shortcomings. Lecturers can delude themselves that their courses are going well, but discussion leaders know when their teaching is failing to rouse the students' interest by the indifferent quality of responses and the general torpor of the class. Trying to conduct a discussion with apathetic students is much like giving a bad dinner party.²⁴

22. See Harry Brighouse, *Taking Undergraduate Teaching and Learning Seriously*, in *ACADEMIC ETHICS TODAY: PROBLEMS, POLICIES AND PROSPECTS FOR UNIVERSITY LIFE*, 261–72 (2022).

23. Carl Edwin Wiseman, *Expertise in University Teaching & the Implications for Teaching Effectiveness, Evaluation & Training*, 148 *DAEDALUS* 47–48 (2019).

24. See DEREK BOK, *OUR UNDERACHIEVING COLLEGES* 125 (2006). Bok doesn't cite a study showing just how much professors talk in classrooms, but if you spend some time walking the halls of buildings with many smaller classrooms and listen in, you can judge for yourself. And, if you spend much time at the back of classrooms in which professors talk a lot, you can judge for yourself how much listening is happening. I do both regularly and see no reason to doubt Bok's suspicions.

Most faculty do not know how to run a good discussion that elicits and engages a wide variety of reasonable and relevant viewpoints.

The skill deficit is compounded by another problem. Despite the institutional promises in mission statements and on websites and the high ideals to which most faculty would happily sign on, relatively few faculty teaching morally and politically-inflected issues participate in ongoing professional deliberation about the aims and purposes or effective methods of instruction. Conservative political entrepreneurs sometimes claim that left wing indoctrination is rife on college campuses. While a few professors certainly enter their classrooms determined to recruit students to their political and moral viewpoints, we do not have evidence that this is widespread. Much more common, I think, are professors who have not thought carefully and collaboratively with others about how, whether, and when to separate their own personal viewpoints from their professional practice, and who inhabit professional communities which are, themselves, echo chambers. They do not discuss questions about instruction in department meetings. Nor—except for a minority of professors who are particularly interested—do they discuss them in the corridors, or at professional meetings which are almost entirely devoted to presentations and discussions of research. And whatever professional discussions around instruction they are involved in are generally bound by their discipline or field, whereas questions about how to teach morally and politically-inflected issues cross many disciplines and fields. Professors individually develop their own practices and think those practices are justified, but, because there is so little collective attention to the issues, they are not regularly prompted to reassess. Because we have so little evidence of our effectiveness, professors assume that what they are doing is appropriate. The professor who simply teaches that standardized testing is a racist practice is not usually indoctrinating; he is just not nested in a healthy professional community of deliberation around instruction.

V. SUGGESTIONS

I am going to very cautiously make some suggestions for college leaders and administrators, instructors, and students who find the analysis I have provided persuasive.²⁵

The suggestions are made cautiously because leaders and administrators have different strengths and weaknesses and different contexts. And I am, generally, uneasy about calls for large scale reform in higher education which, frankly, often seem to serve as excuses for doing nothing. It is worth thinking about what can be done in the short-to-medium term in particular contexts that will do some good even if large-scale reform cannot be delivered. In colleges and universities, it

25. For an excellent and much more comprehensive discussion of what colleges and universities can do to improve how they serve students, including in the dimensions that I discuss here, see Anthony Simon Laden, *Subject to Change: Building Trust in Higher Education* (forthcoming). Laden's work and ideas have influenced this paper and others I have written about the civic mission of higher education a great deal.

usually cannot. I hope that the rare leader who is in a context in which large-scale reform is feasible and has the ability to deliver it can find something useful here, but that person is not my intended audience.

A leader might put resources behind the development of high-quality professional development resources and create large incentives for faculty to use them. If, like me, you believe that many college teachers, including many who teach about politically and morally-valenced issues, lack the skills needed to manage effective discussions in which students are guided to take seriously and engage productively with viewpoints that they are disposed to reject, funding voluntary professional development programs that teach the relevant pedagogical skills and providing incentives for professors to participate in those programs would be one option. On my own campus, several hundred teachers have taken *The Discussion Project*, an intensive training in discussion facilitation in which they learn techniques for inducing all students to participate frankly and productively in classroom discussions. Here is its mission statement:

Engaging discussions are one of the most rewarding and memorable activities that students and faculty alike can experience in the classroom. Recent research shows that classroom discussion deepens learning, creates community, and helps students form an academic identity.

At the same time, classroom discussion is a challenging pedagogical undertaking. It requires the instructor to orchestrate learning among a group of students who likely do not know each other, come from a diversity of backgrounds, possess a range of political commitments, arrive with varying levels of familiarity with the course material, and have different levels of comfort speaking in class.

Inviting students to discuss also comes with some risk, because we do not know what students are going to say. That unknown means that the instructor will have to be ready to follow one student's interesting and unexpected line of thought, correct another's misunderstanding about the material, and also be prepared to respond to any number of possibly off-topic, inappropriate, hostile, or naïve comments.²⁶

Such programs require a serious investment of resources. *The Discussion Project* took a year to select and train its staff and has been continually revising its curriculum in the light of experience. In its first couple of years, it provided participants with a small stipend. Due to the word of mouth support it has garnered, it has been able to flourish without that stipend in subsequent years, but there is no doubt that it could expand (on a large campus like mine) if new faculty and teaching assistants were required to take it, or even if participants could be offered a substantial payment for completion.

26. *The Discussion Project*, Univ. OF WISC. MADISON, <https://discussion.education.wisc.edu/> [<https://perma.cc/R7A6-GSFM>] (last visited Apr. 3, 2024).

The Discussion Project also offers instructional coaches to participants. The coaches are mostly experienced former secondary school teachers, and they mostly coach relatively inexperienced college teachers—many first-year faculty on my campus (and many other R1 campuses) have never been instructor of record for a course before, most have very limited teaching experience, and very few have any systematic training. Just as a little coaching in a new sport can go a long way, so it can in teaching using discussion-generating strategies.

Direct support for instructional improvement is not the only strategy available. Faculty on many campuses are not very politically, socio-economically, or religiously diverse. That lack of diversity is reflected in the choices that they make about whom to bring onto the campus to speak at events. When politically and morally-inflected topics are addressed in campus events, left-of-center speakers, and assumptions, predominate. Despite academia's self-image as a crucible of engagement and dialogue, the ordinary protocols of academic events betray that ideal. Somebody generally talks at an audience for quite a long time and then answers questions posed from the audience. This means that the (not very diverse) voices chosen by faculty dominate events that faculty are responsible for organizing. Leaders can create incentives for the facilitation of more inclusive and engaging events which bring conservative and religious perspectives onto campus in fora in which real engagement is fostered.

I should sound a note of extra caution here. Campus and college leaders might be tempted to hand these tasks off to existing units that work on teaching and learning—either Centers of Teaching and Learning, which are increasingly common, or Schools of Education. On some campuses this will be a sensible choice (the founder of *The Discussion Project* was the Dean of the School of Education, and it is currently run out of a research center within that school), but on others it will not. It would be a mistake to take for granted that either kind of unit is institutionally committed to the civic mission that I have outlined. Even when leaders of those units are committed to such a vision, they may well know that substantial numbers of the people working for them have a divergent vision for the classroom, which will tend to prevail in the execution of the project. Doing something like *The Discussion Project* well requires the right kind of vision and the right kind of expertise. Either without the other will not do and may make things worse.

Residence life can also play a role. Dorms can instigate programs that are carefully designed and supervised to ensure that at least students who are interested can engage with one another across political differences in an environment structured to foster reason giving and reason taking. Background materials can be developed to enable informed discussion, and topics can be chosen on which students' political priors do not straightforwardly imply particular policy choices; facilitators can be trained in the pedagogical techniques outlined below.

Many universities now have first-year cohort programs, some built into the curriculum and others co-curricular, which could host attempts to develop programs that would foster deliberative responsibility. For example, a First Year Interest

Group program often consists of a single small seminar class, and the students take one or two other thematically related classes together. It would be possible to experiment with deliberately creating seminar classes that select students for their political diversity, and purposefully design the curriculum and pedagogy to facilitate the development of the skills and attitudes that constitute deliberative responsibility. As long as the scale is small, it should be possible to continue such classes into a second semester, perhaps for one credit, so as not to prevent students from fulfilling major requirements and prerequisites.

Leaders can also signal in the language they use that they care about the civic mission and how they conceive of it. Of course, leaders have incentives to speak in anodyne generalities to external audiences such as alumni and legislators, and to convey that faculty are already excellent in everything, including teaching for the civic mission. But, when addressing teachers and students on their own campuses, leaders can be a little more frank, digging deeper than affirmations of the importance of free speech to specify that the college aspires for classrooms in which the full range of reasonable political and moral outlooks will be entertained, in which students and teachers treat one another with respect, and in which they listen carefully. And they can affirm that many religious commitments and both conservative and left-wing political views fall within the reasonable range that they expect to be engaged and entertained, as well as perspectives from students from immigrant, religious, international, rural, urban, racial minority, poor, working-class, and middle-class backgrounds. It would also help if, amid the enthusiasm that leaders of successful organizations must show for their employees, they would acknowledge that the task of teaching citizenship skills and dispositions is difficult and that success requires continual improvement. They can uncover and highlight examples of good practice, both at the level of the individual classroom and, where it exists, at the department level.

All of the above strategies require some sort of administrative coordination and support. But what about *instructors* who just want to facilitate a classroom that fosters deliberative responsibility? If something like *The Discussion Project* is available on their campus, they can take it.²⁷ If not, they can ask administrators to bring something like it to their campus. If that fails, they can initiate discussions within their unit, or across cognitively related units. There is not a vast literature on teaching morally and politically-inflected issues in higher education, but a literature exists about secondary school teaching which thoughtful college instructors can learn from even though their context is different.²⁸ At colleges that are anywhere near a State Capitol (as many state flagships are), they can invite politicians from different parties into classrooms.

27. I tried to improve my own teaching before *The Discussion Project* was developed. If you are interested, see Harry Brighouse, *Becoming a Better College Teacher (If You're Lucky)*, 148 DAEDALUS 14–28 (2019).

28. See, e.g., DIANA HESS & PAULA MCAVOY, *THE POLITICAL CLASSROOM* (2015).

Here are some thoughts about the kinds of pedagogical strategies that might promote the aim of creating what some might think of as a safe space for mutual engagement across moral and political disagreement and the ultimate goal of deliberative responsibility:

When the class is small enough, learn the students' names as quickly as you can, and ensure that students get to know one another's names too. As Kailey Mullane explains: "Knowing a classmate's name instantly creates a more inviting environment and is the first step in developing a relationship. In those classes, I notice that instead of sitting silently staring at screens, students actually talk to one another before class starts. They talk *during* class: students are more willing to offer comments, ask questions and disagree with one another."²⁹

Use pre-class anonymous surveys to gauge the range and distribution of priors, including political outlooks, in the class, and use the information to ensure that a variety of perspectives are aired.³⁰

Use reading materials that present a range of moral and political perspectives, including perspectives that are identifiably conservative and identifiably liberal.

Invite careful scrutiny of those perspectives, with an emphasis on getting students to challenge their own and each other's presuppositions.

Bring somebody (a dean, a city councilor, a senior police officer, a school principal, or a legislator) who is responsible for actual decision-making into the classroom to outline a specific moral or ethical dilemma that troubles them for the students to discuss.

Raise issues, especially earlier in the course, on which you expect there to be authentic disagreement in the room which do not fall predictably along straightforward left-right lines.

Refrain from asides that might alienate students from one or more parts of the political spectrum.³¹

Refrain from sharing one's own judgements about the issues which are at stake in the class.

Do not ask, or expect, individual students to represent group perspectives.

29. Harry Brighouse, *What Students Say is Good Teaching*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Sept. 3, 2018), <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/09/04/tips-students-help-improve-your-teaching-opinion> [<https://perma.cc/DRG6-ADRM>].

30. In particular, if you know from the survey that a good number of students hold a particular view pertinent to the subject matter and that view is never raised, you know that something is going wrong. For more on how I, personally, use surveys, see Harry Brighouse, *Giving a Voice to Students' Opposing Views*, ACUE BLOG (May 7, 2019), <https://acue.org/blog/giving-a-voice-to-students-opposing-views/> [<https://perma.cc/24VX-5C9M>].

31. I have become reasonably skilled at this, but I have found that it is much easier to achieve if one refrains from such activity in one's regular life, which makes me a less interesting or clichéd (depending on your outlook) person to spend time with outside of the classroom.

Ensure that all students speak regularly, sometimes in a frank exchange of reasons, and other times in a position where they have to discern reasons for a view that they don't actually hold.³²

What can *students* do? Most of my discussion up to this point has treated students as if they have limited agency in the classroom. This is because they do! There is, and should be, a large power differential between the instructor, who plans out the lesson, controls the use of time, and directs the discussions within the classroom as well as assessing the students' performance, and the student, whose action is constrained by the decisions that the instructor makes. But students do not lack agency altogether, especially in well-managed classrooms. Most students I have spoken with think that, if the instructor is really bad, then they largely lack agency, and they certainly do not blame their classmates for checking out. However, they also acknowledge that, with even moderately good instructors, individual students can enhance the class environment. Even with poor instructors, students can, of course, refrain from eye-rolling and hypervigilance, talking too much, and talking without thinking ahead of time. But with good enough instructors, they can go further: connecting what they say to what their peers have said, interpreting one another charitably, gently asking one another for clarification, acknowledging good reasons that have been given against their own views, and engaging in self-criticism. Emotionally intelligent students know quite well how to convey to their classmates an openness to disagreement and that they will make contributions in a spirit of cooperation. One or two strong students can compensate to some extent for lack of instructional skill. I have seen self-confident left-wing students, in classrooms in which their views are widely shared, deliberately sit with a conservative student, nudging them to provide their perspective when it might not otherwise be forthcoming and normalizing that students' participation, not out of sympathy for the student, but for the sake of a more inclusive and productive experience.³³ It is not something I would expect of all students, but it is something it is reasonable to expect of—and even suggest to—the more self-confident and emotionally intelligent students in our classrooms.

VI. CONCLUSION

Some readers will think my discussion and proposals unacceptably tame. Some think that the United States is in a period of extreme crisis, in which democracy is under intense threat, and that the time for exchanging reasons is over.

32. See Harry Brighouse, *Structured Academic Controversy: A Variant*, CROOKED TIMBER (Jan. 11, 2023) <https://crookedtimber.org/2023/01/11/structured-academic-controversy-a-variant/> [<https://perma.cc/L8NA-VNUL>].

33. Many left-of-center students have expressed to me their frustration at regularly being in classrooms in which their priors are not challenged by classmates or the instructor—a mirror of the frustration right-of-center students have expressed about feeling that their contributions would not be welcomed or even acceptable.

Indeed, treating conservatives as if they are susceptible to reason and have reasons of their own is laughable, and teaching students to do so is at best deeply misleading. Refraining from “sharing one’s judgements about the issues which are at stake in the class” is wrong; we should in fact be attempting to get our students to share our judgements. Even teaching some issues as if there are multiple reasonable perspectives is wrongheaded. With abortion illegal in some States and regulated harshly in others, it wrongly plays into the hands of the enemy to present the morality of abortion as something to be discussed among reasonable people.

Nobody with that perspective is likely to have read this far. I will respond nevertheless. Here are just three considerations that lead me to reject that outlook, despite understanding that substantial numbers of elected officials have shown themselves willing to undermine democratic outcomes and institutions if that is a means to their own advancement and that substantial numbers of others are actively hostile to democracy.

First, it is the case that reasonable people disagree about the morality of abortion because some genuine moral reasons count against its permissibility, while others point toward its permissibility. Similarly, to give another example, the degree of discretion democratic polities should have when making decisions about how open their borders will be to immigrants is open to discussion. That we should not induce our students to reason together about the morality of abortion after the Supreme Court has withdrawn the right to abortion at the Federal level, rendering abortion suddenly illegal in several States, strikes me as an eccentric position for defenders of a right to abortion to take.

Second, like right-wing critics who accuse professors of indoctrination, left-wingers who seek to get students to share their views overestimate their capacity for influence. Students are practiced at doing whatever it takes to please professors, and trying to induce students to adopt one’s own views on political and moral matters about which reasonable people disagree, quite apart from constituting a violation of a duty to respect the student, breeds cynicism, and deprives students of the educational experience through which they can learn deliberative skills and attitudes. Even the extent to which professors do it already seems to have provoked a backlash that has reduced the legitimacy of higher education.

Third, it seems naïve to me to imagine that universities and colleges can be bastions of resistance to political reaction. Although operating in highly imperfect markets which create space for the kinds of instruction I am recommending, undergraduate education is funded almost entirely through government subsidies and tuition receipts. Public authorities are themselves subject to contestation by the very forces that threaten to erode democracy, and the families that pay tuition are substantially motivated by the desire to advantage the students economically. While the practices I am recommending are to some extent countercultural in the ways I have outlined, they are more sustainable than the partisan stance that the hypothetical objector recommends precisely because

they can command legitimacy and acceptance across political divides that the more partisan approaches cannot.

Democracy may be under threat. But if so, the appropriate contribution of higher education to its defense is fostering deliberative responsibility. Asking colleges and universities to do the partisan work that is the stock in trade of labor unions, political parties, and social movements strikes me as a symptom of unseriousness about politics as well as a misconception of the mission of higher education and misunderstanding of what colleges and universities can reasonably be expected to achieve.³⁴

34. I am grateful to Mike McPherson for prompting me to think about the themes of this essay, to Diana Hess and others in the Sunday seminar for continuing conversations, to Grace Gecewicz, Hannah Bounds, Trinity Geise, Avra Reddy, Lily Freemyer, Max Patterson and Sydney Mortenson for helping me think about the agency of students, to participants in the Georgetown University workshop for comments, and, as ever, to Gina Schouten and David O'Brien for invaluable suggestions and help in avoiding errors.