

# College Students (and Colleges) Should Listen to Obama's Advice

In Des Moines last year, President Obama [told gatherers](#) at a town hall that one of the primary benefits of college is that it challenges the assumptions and ideas of young minds. Or at least college should do that.

*Look, the purpose of college is not just...to transmit skills. It's also to widen your horizons; to make you a better citizen; to help you to evaluate information; to help you make your way through the world; to help you be more creative. The way to do that is to create a space where a lot of ideas are presented and collide, and people are having arguments, and people are testing each other's theories, and over time, people learn from each other, because they're getting out of their own narrow point of view and having a broader point of view.*

Amen, Mr. President. The problem? This is happening less and less on university campuses. Oh, political and ideological diversity is encouraged—so long as the ideas don't offend anyone. As NYU Professor Jonathan Haidt has [pointed out](#), there is a dangerous trend of political orthodoxy on campuses, which “have been growing more politically purified since the 1990s.” An NYU student [recently wrote](#) that the campus she was visiting *in China* was more tolerant and open to different viewpoints than her school in the U.S.

This sounds very different from the environment Obama describes during his own college experience.

*...[W]hen I went to college, suddenly there were some folks who didn't think at all like me. And if I had an opinion about*

*something, they'd look at me and say, well, that's stupid. And then they'd describe how they saw the world. And they might have had a different sense of politics, or they might have a different view about poverty, or they might have a different perspective on race, and sometimes their views would be infuriating to me. But it was because there was this space where you could interact with people who didn't agree with you and had different backgrounds that I then started testing my own assumptions. And sometimes I changed my mind.*

The president is right. Students and faculty should not be afraid that they will be investigated for sharing ideas and expressing viewpoints just because someone finds that viewpoint offensive. (As Stephen Fry [colorfully explains](#) [profanity warning], being offended doesn't give a person rights, though many seem to think it does.)

Do you agree with the president that universities should be fostering environments where different perspectives and ideas “collide, and people are having arguments”?

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[H/T](#) Jonathan Haidt

[IMAGE CREDIT: Pixabay]