

Fetishizing Victimhood: How Colleges Promote Psychological Frailty

Administrators at the University of Florida recently notified students that a 24-hour counseling hotline is available to anyone who feels offended by Halloween costumes. Other colleges, in an attempt to pre-empt the psychological threat of offensive costumes, have created and distributed Halloween costume guidelines to help students make appropriate choices if they decide to dress up.

“Is Your Halloween Costume Racist?” while Tufts University went a step further, sending a letter to students in fraternities and sororities indicating they could face investigation (by university police) and punishment for making the wrong costume choice.

There is an increasing demand for safe spaces and trigger warnings to protect students not from physical danger, but from ideas, course material, and viewpoints they may find offensive. Conservative speakers are being banned from campus because students claim to find them threatening. Professors are being investigated for not being sufficiently politically correct in class, failing to predict what material might trigger students, or refusing to use gender neutral pronouns that are not even part of the English language.

Even more concerning perhaps are recent moves to create racially segregated student retreats, student unions, and campus housing in the service of offering marginalized groups places of refuge and healing.

Many might see such examples as evidence of positive change, a greater sensitivity to gender, racial, and cultural diversity.

The problem is that these efforts, even if well-intended, promote a false psychology, that humans are inherently emotionally fragile and can be mentally destabilized or incapacitated by subtle and ambiguous offenses.

Unless students are suffering from a severe mental illness, the type of pathology that would likely keep them from being able to attend and succeed in college to begin with, they should be perfectly capable of remaining psychologically healthy in the face of offensive Halloween costumes, distasteful jokes or comments, and sensitive course material.

People are generally quite psychologically resilient. After all, as far as we know, we are the only species aware of our mortality, and that death can come at any time for reasons we often cannot predict or control. And yet, most of us are not paralyzed by anxiety about our inevitable demise. We are able to get out of bed each morning and be productive citizens. As part of a research project, my colleagues and I collected autobiographical narratives from older British adults who were children during World War II and had very detailed memories of being separated from family, having to take shelter underground during German bombing raids, and facing a considerable amount of personal upheaval and loss.

Those experiences did not mentally break these individuals. In fact, they became sources of meaning and triumph, life events that helped define character and generate gratitude.

My grandmother once told me she was thankful for the hunger and poverty she experienced during the Great Depression because it helped her grow into an empathetic adult and inspired her to always help those in need.

Ironically, the victim protection campaigns many colleges are engaged in not only underestimate human resilience, they may actually cause the problems they are designed to solve because they suggest to students who wouldn't otherwise feel like

victims that they are, in fact, victims.

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I am especially concerned about the push to segregate students. Research in social psychology has long shown that segregating people into different groups does not improve relations between groups. It actually causes greater tension, hostility, and conflict.

By nature, people show favoritism toward those they perceive as part of their own tribe, so the key to positive relations between people from different groups is to bring them together under a unified group identity, to foster a sense of common humanity. As Leigh Ann Walls, an army veteran, recently told me, “there was so much diversity in the army, and it worked because we weren’t paying attention to it. We focused outwards, not inwards.”

In most real-world contexts, fragility signals weakness and dependence. But in the victimhood culture promoted on many college campuses, because fragility is celebrated, it signals high status. This creates an arms race in which different groups try to one up each other on which is the most threatened and vulnerable. As Hoff Sommers puts it, on many college campuses victimhood status “confers authority and prestige.”

Historically, people have fought prejudice and discrimination by demonstrating that they are equally intelligent, strong, and capable. I have yet to see any evidence that playing up one’s emotional vulnerabilities will actually lead to any long-term positive outcomes.

The self-focus of the victimhood movement also diminishes the real suffering going on in the world. I worked for a couple of years in community social and mental health services. It was eye-opening. I counseled women who had lost custody of their

children and were desperately trying to develop needed life skills and sever relationships with abusive men in the hope of getting their kids back. I worked with homeless people who were trying to find a job and a place to live, but were struggling with addiction and mental health problems, making it hard for them to reliably comply with our program. I saw up close the crystal methamphetamine epidemic wreck many young lives.

America is filled with truly hurting and broken people. They are an entirely different class of individuals than the growing number of college students demanding safe spaces and trigger warnings.

Curiously, the loudest cries often come from students attending the most expensive and elite colleges. Poor single moms trying to work their way through community college don't have time to fetishize victimhood. I know that there are students who legitimately struggle with mental illness and they should get the help they need, but as a nation we cannot afford to celebrate and promote psychological fragility.

Nothing good can come from treating colleges like hospitals, places where sick students come to be quarantined and healed. Instead, we should treat colleges like fitness centers for the brain, places where students learn to build their mental muscles. Training is hard, sometimes painful. But it makes one stronger.