

# This house believes college safe spaces are absurd



Phos Halas (PRO)

Greetings, welcome to another edeb8 debate. Today's topic will be that of "safe spaces" and their use in campuses across the West. Before anything I would like to give a special thanks to the admin for debating this topic with me. This is my first debate with admin and no matter who wins I hope for a good debate that everyone enjoys. I would also like to say real quick I am posting this from my phone (my laptop is broken) so if the paragraphs are not as organized on a desktop I apologise.

Before we begin, I would like to define our terms.

1. Absurd. The Cambridge online dictionary defined absurd as "wildly unreasonable."

I believe that is a good definition so I will go with that. The resolution of this debate is to say that the use of and idea behind safe spaces across campus is wildly unreasonable.

Secondly, we must define what a safe space is. I will provide two definitions below.

Merriam Webster says this concerning safe spaces:

"a place (as on a college campus) intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations" (1)

Dean of Chicago University John Ellison, writing a letter regarding safe spaces, defined them as such:

"...we do not condone the creation of intellectual safe spaces where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own" (2)

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So are we starting to see a thread here? The safe space is not where people go to escape physical danger. It is a place where people go to ***escape ideas***.

And they are quite common. I found a list online listing twenty campuses that have at least one in the U.S. alone. (3)

This is absurd firstly because:

### **1. Differing opinions are not harmful**

This is the crux of the issue. If someone has a dissenting opinion from that of the safe space seeker, that idea or opinion is not capable of causing physical harm. That's an obvious fact that ideas and views cannot actually hurt anybody.

If one is going to cite some type of emotional harm or mental distress, to that I simply say if a human individual is not capable of simply listening to or being around a viewpoint contrary to their own, that individual does not belong in a university, which was presumably founded on the idea that human learning and flourishing is dependent on debate and reasoning.

### **2. Bad ideas need to be challenged, not hidden from.**

I'm going to change directions here and grant for a moment that certain people on college campuses really and truly do hold to ideas that are truly dangerous and harmful.

To employ the use of safe spaces is still wildly unreasonable. Why?

In the late 30s and 40s Germany had this idea that the Jewish people needed to be exterminated.

Around the same time, a man named Benito Mussolini had this idea that he should receive the Roman empire and stop anyone in his way.

Simultaneously, in Japan, emperor Hirohito had this idea that his empire should invade much of Asia.

*Let me make this very clear, the free world did not set up "safe spaces" to shelter themselves from these evil ideas. They washed these ideas away in the blood of their soldiers.*

When we as a culture embrace the idea behind safe spaces, we are embracing one falsehood and one bad idea, that:

A. Ideas IN AND OF THEMSELVES have the capacity to harm someone

And B. That if that were the case, the best thing to do is hide.

Is this the culture we want for the next generation? One that hides from adversity or people that disagree with them? One that believes differing ideas can actually cause them harm in and of themselves?

No, that is wildly unreasonable.

Thank you all..



admin (CON)

I'd like to thank my opponent for his patience and instigating another super interesting topic. As a longstanding proponent of free debate and open ideas myself, I think this is an issue we can all agree is important.

While my opponent has chosen to focus on absurdity and safe spaces, I want to begin by questioning what a college is in today's society. From there I intend to explain what the case is for safe spaces. Finally, I will answer some of the points my opponent raised in a segment I like to call my "rebuttal". Without further ado, let's get started!

## What a college is

You've probably heard a lot of stereotypes about students recently. They're drunk frat boys, they're nerds, they're athletes, and more often than not, they're poor. College is *expensive* and if that's not enough, housing around colleges is unaffordable except for the Richie Riches of the world. Students pay ungodly sums for textbooks, online materials, and all the other stuff colleges make you buy. Then you factor in that it's hard to do a job while you're in college nowadays, meaning many students need to take internships which are often unpaid, to just get a foot in the door / work experience. Therefore, in order to pay their way through college, the overwhelming majority of students take on student debt. In most countries this accrues a very high rate of interest and the penalties if a payment is missed are extremely taxing. I remember being evicted when I was studying. I remember having to literally beg people I knew for food. This wasn't a nightmare, it was real life. And I'm not special at all - these are common everyday experiences for college students.

College life is *not easy*. If the financial burden was not bad enough, there's the pressure of academic success, made all the more difficult by the curve-grading system employed by many colleges that guarantees failure for any students who are not among the top few percent of the class. This is a time when many people have relationship drama, and fall into substance abuse. Even if this doesn't affect everyone personally, seeing it happen to other people around you will give anyone at least a bit of anxiety. For older students, they may have to contend with the pressure of studying while also raising a family, or feeling left out because they're from another generation. Many political and other organisations target college students because they're full of energy, and so many also get roped in to doing even more work on top of what they already do. And even if the students graduate, many students worry about their future career prospects, with an economy increasingly defined by massive income inequalities and robots taking over the workforce.

There's only one word that adequately defines college life. That word is stress.

Colleges are stressful places, yet society still expects anyone with even a modicum of academic talent to go there and burn themselves out. There's a race to the bottom effect, where eventually

only the most dedicated students get through it ok, and then everyone else has to try to be increasingly more and more dedicated to keep up. Small wonder that so many turn to wild parties to escape their problems, only to realize this actually makes their situation worse. Note that I am only describing the general social conditions of college to this point, to paint a picture of the already-desperate lives many college students face. I don't mean to imply that anything I have said to this point implies the need for safe spaces. I say this because it puts the dilemma I am about to explain into sharp focus.

### **The problem**

Colleges are, indeed, a place where ideas are put out into the open. That's precisely because people from all walks of life go there. It's not like in wider society where you can choose to live and work basically anywhere nowadays - in colleges you're constantly surrounded by so many people from all over the world. Furthermore, colleges have a culture and tradition that not only enables and facilitates open-minded discourse around ideas, based on the principles of the enlightenment era, but increasingly vindicates any communication of ideas no matter how bad those ideas might be. Finally, the rise of the internet has seen many people treat it as a lawless haven, where any communication may be freely posted. This in turn has given rise to people saying things only to get a reaction from people, also known as "trolling." Unfortunately, elements of this culture have crept into colleges, as these have always been at the forefront of internet technology.

Let's explore, however, what happens if we allow just any idea to be shared, and examine the social harms. For example, is there a social harm in sharing the idea that people should kill all people of color? In my view, there is, because it might inspire in others the desire to kill those people. Even if it didn't, it is still a very distressing thing to hear for those people, and for anyone worried they could be caught in the crossfire. That is why these kinds of ideas are generally considered hate speech. Is there a social harm in sharing information on how to make drugs, or more effectively abuse children, or murder somebody and get away with it? I personally think so, because it might inspire others to commit those crimes. That is why those kinds of communication are generally illegal. Absolutely no country in the world has an absolute unrestricted freedom to speak, and every country in the world has at least one freedom from speech. Even saying mean things *about* somebody - what would be commonly called a personal attack - is actually immensely damaging to social fabric in an age where this information is readily

attack - is actually immensely damaging to social fabric in an age where this information is readily available. Protecting one's online reputation is next to impossible when people are allowed to post that you're a slut, creep or idiot all over the internet.

Yet in colleges, these socially harmful communications are undoubtedly common. Literally right now in the news there's reports covering sexist comments made against the researcher who designed the algorithm which captured the first picture of a black hole. It's not just girls who are affected by sexism, it is boys as well, who are always expected to act in a "masculine" way by many people. Let's not ignore racism, which again, affects everyone. Ageism. Trans-phobia. Sexuality. Religion. Country of origin. Discrimination on the basis of wealth or family name. Heck, the accents people use to speak. Universities are rife with these ideas. Not only have they failed to prevent them, but they have been complicit in spreading them. For example, affirmative action has been used by many colleges in decidedly racist or sexist ways. Even if they didn't, the media investigations into such scandals alone make college unsafe.

Even the people who are not personally targeted by such attacks can be affected in several ways. First, such communications often provoke backlash from the affected groups, compounding the problem significantly. Occasionally this backlash can be even worse than the original problem, and spread far beyond the borders of the university through social media. Secondly, they may know other people who are affected, and therefore become targeted as a sympathizer regardless of the truth of that claim. Furthermore, the impact on the individual is increased by the stress of supporting those around them, or ignoring them if they don't. It's hard to carry both one's own burdens and to also visibly see the burdens of others around you.

The impact of this on those affected is nothing minor, and even worse because they're already stressed. In addition, the usual reason why they're stressed in the first place is because they're vulnerable. It might mean they become so worried that they cause harm to themselves, or try to harm others. They could try to escape in various unhealthy ways. Many drop out, further disadvantaging themselves and others from their community who become increasingly isolated, and therefore easier to attack. These things are harmful because they vindicate those who are trying to break our society apart and divide us up. That's how people get defeated and destroyed.

At the end of the day, it's impossible to have a rational debate when you're being shut down at every opportunity by others launching repeated, vile personal attacks against you. For constructive dialogue to occur, others need to listen to your side of the story too. That means everyone in colleges need to have the opportunity to speak up and be heard. Despite the extraordinary resilience of many students today, the current situation is unacceptable and not helpful to free and open dialogue. It is too late to entirely stop the toxic culture that exists around most universities today. However, there is a solution to this problem.

### **The solution**

When you think about a typical job, many of these same pressures may exist. The difference is that you can escape them pretty easily - just go home to your living room, sit down in a comfortable position, turn on your computer, search up funny cat pictures, and enjoy. Basically, what you're doing is escaping ideas *for a while*. Your brain just needs a reset, a chuckle, and some rest. Brain breaks are not only fun, but important and constructive to thinking, and therefore, sharing ideas.

Sadly this doesn't work at college. People get stuck there for long hours, far longer than at work because of the aforementioned race to the bottom. People don't have living rooms - they go back to damp one-room rental flats which they share with tons of room-mates, including that one jerk who keeps them up all night. Computer? Nope, need that for study. Also probably best not to flaunt that too much because theft is a big problem in colleges. Seriously, muggings happen all the time because people are poor and desperate. It's hardly possible to get a comfortable position, or enjoy anything, when your life is like that. And even if that isn't true of all college students, it is at least true for some. Even if this solution helps out only one student, I say that the empowerment of every student should be a goal of colleges, with the enlightenment ideal of universal educational access, and the principle in this debate of enabling open, informed debate.

That solution is basically to put a living room in a college where people can go chill out. Add bean bags, put funny pictures of cute cats on the walls, and maybe some relaxing music, video games etc. Just like how living rooms also don't have people telling you you suck (typically anyway), let's make these living rooms totally judgement-free, so people can just go there to relax and unwind between bursts of being painfully reminded that horrible people exist in society. Also let's call

them safe spaces because John Ellison said so.

This solution works because it allows people to gather their thoughts, just like we do in society generally. It means people are free to explore their passions and be with their thoughts for a moment's peace, without undue disturbance. It means that while people will still be exposed to intolerable hate, at least it won't be a constant part of their lives.

### **Rebuttal**

My opponent in this debate must prove not only that there is no reason for safe spaces to exist (ie disprove the analysis I just presented), but moreover, that college safe spaces are (in his words) wildly unreasonable. Not just plain old unreasonable, but wildly so. That's a pretty tough burden to prove and I'm happy that my opponent is trying to meet it. I wish him good luck.

First my opponent briefly argues it is wildly unreasonable to have something to avoid another thing that can't hurt you. I disagree. Fraud also can't hurt you but it's nice to have laws to stop it. As a general principle, my opponent's view of harm appears to only encompass physical kinds of damage. Even if negative views did not directly cause physical harm or damage - which they do, as I have previously explained - his dismissal of both emotional and mental harms is disingenuous, because without the mind, the body doesn't do much (proof: look at anyone in a coma). In fact, preserving mental health is *required* for both debate and reasoning. If anything, physical damage is the least important in this debate. Stephen Hawking is a good example of somebody who overcame his physical limitations using his keen intellect, and I think we can all agree that such intellectuals belong in universities. What is wildly unreasonable is that we allow environments to flourish where people can say stuff to each other, usually quite openly, which if it were said in any workplace would be a major crime. What is worse is that they do so without prosecution, and that the victims should be denied any sort of support purely because it was not "physical". If anything I would say giving them a bit of a "safe space" does not go far enough!

Secondly my opponent argues safe spaces allow people to escape ideas that need challenging. He cites a number of examples that I completely agree with, where bad ideas flourished in universities and were not sufficiently challenged. In each example he cited, there were no safe spaces in universities. This proves that a lack of safe spaces does not mean ideas get challenged (which is basically a roundabout way of saying that colleges are failing their students by not



(which is basically a roundabout way of saying that colleges are failing their students by not having safe spaces). I insist that safe spaces actually enable debate because you can't debate in an environment where your opponent doesn't believe you have the right to debate, shuts you down, and resorts to constant harassment and personal attacks. Rather, both sides in a debate need to show respect, courtesy, and an open-minded attitude. Having a room to process new ideas without being bullied for what you may have believed before, or constantly bombarded with trolling attacks on your perspective, in my view, actually enables people to *better* challenge ideas, gather their thoughts and improve their arguments. I'd certainly prefer that to an environment where whoever has the loudest voice "wins."

I also want to address pro's characterization of safe spaces as people from one end of a political spectrum avoiding the other, because that's basically how he is treating this. I have two responses. First, there's no harm in this at all. If people who study one thing manage to completely avoid another thing at university, I'd suggest they will never manage to do anything with their myopic perspective, because anything political inherently requires dialogue. At worst you'd have people who never look at the political arguments for the other side. In this case I'd prefer they go to a safe space in a university than never go to a university at all, which is the alternative. At least in a university, there's a good chance in that great melting pot that they'll be exposed to alternative ideas. Secondly, even if this was harmful, I think the kinds of people who go to universities are the kinds of people who *want* to be exposed to new ideas. I say this because it's no secret that universities are terrible places. People willingly go there in spite of their reputation precisely because they wish to confront those concepts. Even if people did go there to escape political ideas, I suggest it is still worthwhile to have safe spaces to avoid wildly unreasonable personal attacks.

I agree there is a toxic culture around universities, but safe spaces are actually an attempt to break this culture, not embrace it.

The resolution is negated.



Phos Halas (PRO)

**Round Forfeited**

