

Breaking Out of the Certainty Trap



ARVARD University's mission statement includes the following language: "Beginning in the classroom with exposure to new ideas, new ways of understanding, and new ways of knowing, students embark on a journey of intellectual transformation."

At Yale, the mission statement says this:

"Yale educates aspiring leaders worldwide who serve all sectors of society. We carry out this mission through the free exchange of ideas in an ethical, interdependent, and diverse community of faculty, staff, students, and alumni."

Other mission statements from prestigious universities say something similar. So let's use these examples to suppose that college campuses are places for exploring ideas. We might further assume that this includes ideas on contentious topics. We—the faculty, instructors, administrators, and staff that make up campus communities—have both an opportunity and obligation to give

students the time and space to do what the mission statements say they're there to do.

And we're failing.



According to a 2021 Campus Expression Survey, 39.5 percent of students in 2021 are reluctant to share their views on politics, with students who are Republicans expressing greater discomfort than students who are Democrats. At the same time, 88 percent say that "colleges should encourage students and professors to interact respectfully with people whose beliefs differ from their own"—but "63 percent of students agreed that the climate on their campus prevents people from saying things that they believe."

Talking about hot-button issues is hard for many of us. We may be afraid to ask questions. We may struggle to put into words the questions we want to ask. We may be afraid of saying the wrong thing and, consequently, of being judged. But staying silent feels worse, and people tend to benefit from discussing the most difficult questions openly.

Failing to build a campus culture that fosters discourse is more than simply a missed opportunity. It's a failure that has profound implications. Students don't remain students forever, and not preparing them to engage with a variety of perspectives on difficult topics has serious consequences after college. For instance, most jobs require high levels of cooperation and, as one *Forbes* writer quoted from an interview he conducted with psychologist Jonathan Haidt, "an ability to submerge your own concerns for the good of the team." The inability to compromise or see the world from another point of view can make the college-to-work transition difficult both for the former students and for their employers. Further, our on-campus failure leads us to export a culture of intolerance to the corporate world and other communities.

For many people, the kinds of topics that fall into this category

involve issues such as race, identity, equality, intent, or concepts of fairness. A more specific (but by no means exhaustive) list might include affirmative action, immigration policy, transgender rights, the relationship between gender and biology, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and the role of culture in shaping outcomes.

In my work in and outside the classroom, in which I spend a great deal of time talking with students and other groups about these topics, I don't see my role as endorsing or condemning a particular position. And I don't see my goal as changing anyone's mind or getting people to agree. Success is providing people with the tools to advance understanding and foster constructive engagement. In other words, *the goal is to live with the disagreement*. If we can't do this, we cannot engage constructively with someone who holds a different view. Many people would probably see this as a worthy goal, so what gets in the way?

When it comes to controversial topics, certainty may be the one factor more than any other that prevents us from engaging with people who disagree. Certainty in this case refers to a resolute unwillingness to consider the possibility that we might not be right or might not be right in the way that we think we are.

We can think of this conviction as “the Certainty Trap.” It ensnares everyone from students to instructors to administrators at the highest levels of our institutions of higher education—in addition to many people outside campus walls.

The Certainty Trap is driven by the Settled Question Fallacy. We fall into this fallacy when we treat open questions as though they have known and definitive answers or when we behave as though the right path forward is obvious, clear, and has no downside. This limits our ability to solve problems, and it shapes how we judge people who disagree. Once we've fallen into the Settled Question Fallacy, we can generally imagine only two possible reasons why someone might disagree with us: ignorance or hatefulness. This is because this initial fallacy often leads us to fall into one or more of two other fallacies that make constructive engagement difficult if not impossible.

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The first is the Fallacy of Equal Knowledge. When I conclude that someone is ignorant, I am implicitly expressing the belief that if the other person knew what I knew, he'd agree with me. The second is the Fallacy of Known Intent. When I conclude that someone takes the position he does because he is hateful, I behave as though I know the person's motives.

Recognizing and naming these distortions reminds us that there is often more than one way reasonably minded people might view controversial topics. More specifically, doing so can help us see that someone can approach the same issue differently—have the same information and come to a different conclusion—and still be a good person.



On U.S. college campuses—and often beyond them—the prevailing culture is one that simultaneously feeds on and fosters a mindset according to which complicated issues are seen in terms of good and evil. This mindset, sometimes referred to as binary or all-or-nothing

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thinking, is the Certainty Trap at work. Examples include: Either you offer full-throated support for affirmative action, or you are creating an unsafe environment; either you endorse the idea that gender identity outweighs biological sex, or you're denying dignity to the LGBTQ community; either you judge remarks by their impact regardless of the speaker's intent, or you're indifferent to the hurt experienced by members of marginalized groups.

Sometimes in discussions, the Fallacy of Equal Knowledge comes first: The charitable explanation offered for an unpopular opinion may be that the person simply doesn't know any better. But then, when there is equal information, the Fallacy of Known Intent prevails. When ignorance is no longer a viable explanation, it becomes easy to impute hateful motives. Too often, however, the Fallacy of Equal Knowledge is bypassed altogether.

With this backdrop in mind, how might we use our understanding of the Certainty Trap to talk through some of the most heated conversations on campus?

INEQUALITY

Concerns about inequality—including its causes and how to reduce it—animate a great deal of controversy. Heated discussions about privilege, systemic racism, and the role of culture all stem

primarily from concerns about the extent of disparities between groups. Here's one way to think about how avoiding the Certainty Trap can open conversations that are often otherwise constrained.

For instance, many people are rightly concerned about educational disparities. Significant differences persist across groups in graduation rates, test scores, and other related outcomes. And much of the discourse about these differences spotlights systemic racism as the cause we should focus on—so much so that questioning the role of systemic racism is often seen as a way of denying its existence, which is considered by some to be racist itself.

With this in mind, one exercise that I do occasionally with students goes something like this:

Me: You're all enjoying some degree of educational success. After all, you're here, sitting in this room, on this campus. So to what do you attribute your success? What do you think got you to where you are today?

The students often list things such as: My parents emphasized the importance of excelling academically; I had an inspirational teacher or mentor; I went to class, I studied, or I always really liked school. As they talk, I write their responses down on the board. If it hasn't yet been mentioned, I also ask: What about structural causes, such as the absence of systemic racism or having a well-funded school? Is it possible that those factors played a role, too? Most students quickly nod. So I add "structural causes" to the list on the board.

I then ask them whether they can, with any certainty, order these factors with respect to the contribution of each to their own educational success. Invariably, they can't.

I tell them not to worry, that I can't do it either. Neither can anyone else—even detailed statistical analyses can't sort this out convincingly. And I ask them: What does it mean if we treat as racist the mention of causes other than structural ones?

Through this exercise, they start to see that a discussion of educational inequality that focuses exclusively on structural causes is an example of the Settled Question Fallacy. They also see that automatically labeling as racist people who suggest the importance of other factors is an example of the Fallacy of Known Intent. With this, they start to break out of the Certainty Trap.

IDENTITY

A focus on identity (where identity is defined along the conventional lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) is often at the center of conversations on complex social issues. This can lead the members of various groups to seek to have their identity continually affirmed and recognized as being different and, in some cases, as conferring special insight into the world. However, behaving as though endlessly focusing on identity yields only benefits is another example of the Settled Question Fallacy. Accordingly, getting students to consider the potential downside of defaulting too readily to identity groups can be another step out of the Certainty Trap. One way to encourage this is with an exercise such as the following:

Me: For many of us, our closest friends are people of the same gender. There's something about how we move through the world that creates elements of a shared experience along this particular axis. One way of thinking about this is that identity clearly matters. But is it possible that we can overemphasize it? What happens if we make it everything?

Usually at this point someone in the group recognizes that emphasizing identity too much can be divisive and, in an extreme form, prevent us from communicating with one another. Once the student realizes this, the conversation can shift. When are

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we emphasizing identity too much? And who decides? Engaging with these questions can help us all navigate our way outside the Certainty Trap.

POLITICS

Politics is another realm where the Certainty Trap looms. And perhaps no political issue is more fraught on college campuses than the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Claims that Israel is a colonial power, that Israelis are racist, or that Israel is an apartheid country barely distinguishable from the South Africa of an earlier era have become common. This framing is based in the Certainty Trap. So is the framing that Israel has done nothing wrong and has a blemish-free record. Both treat complex questions of responsibility as though they are settled.

What might a more robust discussion of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict look like, one that's not shrouded in certainty?

Me: People tend to have some pretty strong feelings about who's right and who's wrong when it comes to the Israeli–Palestinian

conflict. Our goal in this classroom isn't to figure that out. But by thinking through some tough questions together, we might get to a deeper, more thoughtful understanding of the different perspectives. For instance, can people on both sides be aggressors and victims? Whose claim to victim status matters more? What is the difference between self-defense and unprovoked aggression? What is the right way to compensate people who have been wronged? Who deserves compensation, in what form, and when? And, of course, who should decide all these things?

Here again, engaging in this manner helps us steer clear of the Settled Question Fallacy—and therefore escape the Fallacies of Equal Knowledge and Known Intent—and consequently take another step away from the Certainty Trap.



We are drawn to the Certainty Trap, at least in part, because certainty makes life easier. It requires us to think less. Certainty also tells us whom to empathize with, which gives us a sense of moral clarity. When we apply our understanding of the Certainty Trap and its fallacies, we create space to consider reasons other than hate and ignorance for an opposing position, an approach that goes hand in hand with breaking down binary and overly simplistic thinking.

The practical way we get past the Certainty Trap mindset is by talking through questions, together and openly, in a way that encourages nuance and complexity.

Navigating these topics might be understandably intimidating to even the most intrepid student or instructor. There is a lot to think through and discuss together. The path forward when it comes to discourse on campus requires a new mindset: one that can tolerate ambiguity on controversial topics and that is open

to questions and criticism on a much wider range of issues than we currently observe.

My hope is that these examples of how to apply this framework will be a starting point, not the final word. *