

# Can College Cultivate Habits of a Free Mind?



*MAGINE that your gifted, curious, and kind twin daughters, Sophie and Adina, are about to begin college.*

Adi enrolls in a highly selective, elite university. Sophie chooses a new, experimental institution.

In the opening session of Adi's orientation week, the university president announces the school's social justice mission of "addressing issues of structural racism, power, privilege, inequity, and injustice." General education requirements will be "decolonized," and a critical theory course "that shows the ways systemic racism is inherent in American society" will be required. All faculty must submit diversity statements as part of their public CVs.

During orientation week, students at Adi's university are trained in using the "bias incident reporting system," and are educated about "intersectionality," "allyship," and "microaggressions." They are given a "suggested language list" and are cautioned that words

can cause "harm, distress, and injury," especially to "minoritized" students. There are more than 50 campus identity groups, all of which provide "safe spaces" for students of those various identities.

On the last day of orientation, a senior dean issues a statement about free speech, stressing that she is "deeply concerned about the impact some speakers may have on individuals' sense of safety and belonging." She offers counseling services to those who ever feel "threatened or harassed" by the presence of any campus speaker.

The motto of Sophie's college, by contrast, is to "Seek Truth, Increase Knowledge, and Enrich Human Life." While secular in its foundation, it is premised in part on the Jewish concept of argument for the sake of heaven. Intellectual and ideological opponents are seen as valuable thinking partners. A lengthy orientation teaches students about academic freedom and its role in institutionalized disconfirmation—the process by which scholars keep one another's confirmation biases in check. It also covers the philosophy of free speech and why the university uses the protections set by the Supreme Court as its own boundaries for freedom of expression.

Dedicated to producing clear-thinking graduates who can thrive in and contribute to a pluralist, liberal democracy, the four-year program provides intensive skills-building for critical thinking, dialogue, debate, and inquiry. Students develop and strengthen habits that foster the ability to engage across lines of difference. Foremost among them: curiosity, compassion, and courage.

Students become aware that they have neither the knowledge nor the wisdom to "school" their elders. If they take issue with members of the staff or faculty, they are encouraged to engage in one-on-one conversations with them. Residential life provides opportunities for meaningful relationships between diverse peers. Each freshman is assigned a roommate from a background unlike his or her own, and roommate pairs are assigned to heterogeneous, small discussion groups for the duration of orientation. Students develop close-knit friendships built on genuine affection, authentic self-disclosure, and the ability to tolerate and resolve conflict.

*Let's imagine that both daughters are politically progressive.*

Unless Adi happens to have nonprogressive friends willing to express their views—and on campuses like hers, such friends seem rare—she is not likely to encounter pushback on her perspectives. Spending four years in an ideological monoculture will blunt her critical-thinking and argumentation skills. In classrooms and commons, she will encounter simplistic interpretations of political differences that caricature disfavored views and those who hold them. Surrounded by like-minded people, she is likely to become more partisan and more hostile toward her ideological opponents.

For her part, Sophie will encounter conservative students willing to share their political opinions. She'll engage in conversations that give her a sense of what the opposing side thinks, and in a required senior seminar, she will make a compelling case for a policy position with which she disagrees. She will be able to distinguish between making *intellectual* judgments about views she opposes and *moral* judgments about the people holding them. Political differences will not be an impediment to personal connections.

*Let's now imagine that both of your daughters are right-leaning thinkers.*

Given the leftward tilt on campus, Adi will have the benefit of her unpopular views being regularly challenged. But she will need to think carefully about how outspoken she wishes to be. Certain words and ideas “invalidate” people's identities, and a growing number of topics are simply “not up for debate.” Sometimes, she is told, words are violence—and silence can be violence, too.

The likely choice Adi will make will be to reveal her views to only a select few, contributing to the widespread misapprehension that there is little ideological disagreement on campus. If she summons the courage to speak up, or even if she defends those who are maligned for their right-of-center views, she is likely to find that

many students she thought of as friends were not friends in the true sense of the word.

While none of this is likely to plague Sophie's college career, she will still experience intellectual discomfort. She will be repeatedly required to grapple with what the other side thinks. She will study classical and contemporary thought, including critical theory—not as *the* way she's expected to see the world, but as one lens among many. Rather than assuming that no decent or intelligent person could hold views she detests, she will learn to consider how decent and intelligent people come to opposite conclusions. She will view ideological opponents with curiosity and compassion rather than contempt.

In developing the courage to debate, dissent, and refuse to automatically conform, Sophie and her classmates will gain the ability to differentiate between *feeling uncomfortable* and *being unsafe*—that is, between an intellectual challenge and a legitimate threat. The ability to maintain this distinction will make them open-minded as thinkers and emotionally resilient as people.

*Now let's consider your daughters' Judaism.*

Though your family has never been particularly observant, you raised the twins with Jewish values, a love of Israel, and a commitment to Jewish ethics, including its tenets of social justice.

No matter what Adi's political leanings, those values will be attacked the moment she sets foot on campus. Hillel and the nearest Chabad aside, the only nominally Jewish campus group at Adi's school is avowedly anti-Zionist. The campus newspaper endorses BDS, as do nearly all identity-based campus groups, and only a few outspoken Jewish professors—mostly the older ones, some of them already emeritus—have taken a stand against it. She and other students try to register an official pro-Israel Jewish group on campus, but the student government votes it down.

The assault on Adi's Jewishness doesn't end there. She is informed that only Jews of color experience racism. She is constantly warned against “white-supremacy culture,” and, thanks to ethnic studies, she is expected to “check” her “privilege” as a “conditionally white” Jew.

As a Jewish student, she is expected to adopt political views that denigrate her own identity.

Here again, things are very different at Sophie's school. Anti-Israel views, in both student groups and the classroom, are permitted as a matter of course, and there is no prohibition on anti-Zionism. But Jewish students are confident about speaking up in Israel's defense, and they draw a bright line between criticism of specific Israeli policies and delegitimization of the Jewish state. Non-Jewish students (and even Jewish students uncertain of their own views) gain moral confidence listening to their unabashedly pro-Israel peers, sometimes going toe-to-toe with anti-Zionists.

Because of the way Sophie's school handles group differences, there is a broad understanding on campus that no identity requires or represents a specific form of politics. The school's strong emphasis on the complexity of the human experience leads students to Walt Whitman's maxim that we each "contain multitudes." Sophie is secure in her identity as a Jew and has clarity that, while important, her Jewishness is just one facet of her whole being. She develops an outlook on life uniquely her own.

*Finally, imagine that it's four years later and your daughters have graduated from college.*

Both earned excellent grades. Both enjoyed their overall college experience. And both are off to law school in the fall—Adi to Yale, Sophie to the University of Chicago. You are proud of them both.

Still, you can't help noticing how their respective college experiences have shaped them differently. Adi, who was the more outspoken, has become both guarded in conversation and more prone to taking offense. When political subjects come up, she withdraws or resorts to clichés. When you propose a summer trip to visit relatives in Tel Aviv, she vaguely alludes to other plans. When you press her about it, she finally reveals that she doesn't want law students at Yale to think she's a Zionist.

Sophie, who used to be the shyer sister, has gone in the opposite direction. She loves mixing it up in conversation. She isn't afraid to

offer her opinion but also isn't afraid to change her mind. She listens closely to other points of view and often admits, "I hadn't thought about that." She's excited about visiting Tel Aviv because she wants to work in technology law. One of her friends from Hebrew school suggests that in the service of *tikkun olam*, instead of visiting Israel, she could intern for a Jewish social justice group that opposes the occupation. Sophie replies that a thriving Israel creates economic opportunities for its people and the region, and forges technologies that improve the world. To her, she tells her friend, that is *tikkun olam*.

*Now let's exit this imaginary scenario.*

Unfortunately, it's not entirely imaginary. Adi's college experience is an amalgam of real-world examples of policies, proposals, and experiences at top-ranked schools such as Harvard, Yale, Berkeley, Wellesley, and Williams. Rather than seeking truth and producing knowledge, these schools increasingly leave students with the impression that all knowledge, wisdom, goodness, truth, and beauty already reside with one ideological tribe. The other tribe is at best a reservoir of ignorance, at worst an instrument of evil.

Sophie's college experience more closely resembles offerings in a dwindling number of schools: the University of Chicago, Johns Hopkins University, St. John's College, and Arizona State University's School for Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership. But it also resembles an ideal that was, until recent decades, more or less standard in American higher education.

What would it take to restore those educational principles to the place they once occupied in American colleges and universities, and for higher education to fulfill the promises of that ideal?

One possibility lies in new experimental programs such as Ralston College and the University of Austin (UATX), though their prospects remain uncertain. Another possibility is that America's flagship institutions can find their way back to a genuine form of

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liberal education. The University of Chicago's Robert Zimmer led that charge for the 15 years of his presidency, and Ronald Daniels, the president of Johns Hopkins, has argued forcefully that higher education must recommit itself to citizenship education, the stewardship of facts, and the cultivation of intellectually pluralistic and engaged communities.

However, Zimmer and Daniels are voices in the wilderness. Witness, by contrast, the recent treatment of Georgetown's Ilya Shapiro, Princeton's Joshua Katz, Harvard's Roland Fryer, and Yale's Amy Chua — just a few of too many instances of universities losing their way. Many top institutions will be able to coast on their name recognition for a long time, irrespective of the quality of their product. Their students will receive an education in ideological dogma rather than truth-seeking and knowledge production.

Fortunately, there's a third possibility.

It is no secret that colleges and universities face a demographic cliff. Enrollment is expected to start falling in 2025, when a shrunken post-Great Recession generation comes of age. The most elite schools will be spared the financial implications. But it will put tremendous pressure on second- and third-tier institutions that cannot rely on name recognition and ultra-wealthy donors to make up revenue

shortfalls. Add inflationary pressures, and families will ask themselves why they should pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for ideological indoctrination in the service of a devalued degree.

It is clear that demand is high for schools that unreservedly commit to freedom of expression and promote its intellectual blessings. Many more parents will be willing to spend money on the lesser-known institutions that teach students critical thinking skills and how to think for themselves than on those that only teach students how to think like critical theorists. Some colleges and universities will no doubt try to stick to business as usual nonetheless. The wiser ones will grasp the opportunity for change. In this era of illiberal orthodoxy and conformism, they can provide these students an intellectual and cultural lifeline while finding themselves a financial one. And they can intentionally select students with a wide range of viewpoints, prioritizing those who can provide evidence that they are capable of and interested in grappling with views with which they disagree. Presidents and trustees have a unique opportunity to remake their institutions as bastions of civic rather than tribal norms, curiosity rather than certitude, and the authentic affection of friends rather than the conditional solidarity of allies.

There's a shorthand for this. I call it "Habits of a Free Mind." It is a toolkit that blends insights from wisdom traditions with those from disciplines including psychology, social science, civics, and history. I taught a course based on these insights at the University of Chicago and will be teaching one at Johns Hopkins. To best serve students, it would be developed into a broader curriculum that shapes the entire educational experience. These habits can be distilled into five essential lessons:

*Uncertainty is not a weakness.* Though it can feel uncomfortable, uncertainty is a spur to curiosity and allows us to benefit from disagreement with others. One kind of uncertainty reflects a lack of confidence. This is appropriate when one lacks knowledge. Another kind reflects intellectual humility. With maturity comes

less of the former and more of the latter. With knowledge and intellectual humility comes wisdom.

*The thinker is not the thought.* We tend to conflate a person's views with his or her dignity and human worth. Yet even people who hold abhorrent views can change their minds. Appreciating this requires compassion, which not only helps us understand the views of others, but also makes it more likely that they will understand ours.

*Courage is anti-tribal.* It does not take courage to speak when your tribe and its "allies" will rush to your defense. It takes courage when doing so puts your social, reputational, and professional standing at risk. In an era when Americans self-censor as never before, academic institutions have a unique responsibility to cultivate courage as the essential moral condition for truth-seeking and knowledge production.

*Offense-taking should not be inquiry-terminating.* The tribal thinking that has overtaken our institutions has resulted in an expanding catalogue of perceived indignities, offenses, harms, and even traumas. Constantly scanning our environment for transgressions and affronts makes us see hostility and malice even where none exists while shutting down needed conversations. Teaching students to habitually give the benefit of the doubt and use the principle of charity for the sake of common inquiry is a difficult but essential part of a serious education.

*Happiness cannot be found when directly pursued.* It is a by-product of leading a meaningful life, which in turn requires an individual sense of purpose. The aim of education is to help students find this sense of purpose by nurturing capacities for critical thinking, self-reflection, humane understanding, and independent judgment. These capacities are difficult and can result in moments of discomfort, anxiety, stress, and even unhappiness. And that's okay.

Higher education in America faces many challenges today: financial, ideological, political. But none is greater than its diminishing ability to instill habits of mind and character that make liberal education itself possible. Those are the anti-dogmatic habits of curiosity, openness, compassion, resilience, risk-taking, and a willingness to change one's mind. They are nurtured not only in classrooms but also in dorm rooms, dining halls, athletic fields, campus clubs, local bars, and everywhere else students begin to discover the shape of adult life.

Adi's college experience—which is, alas, the experience of so many students at elite schools—failed to instill those habits. By the time of her graduation, she will have been led to believe that people of different backgrounds can never truly understand one another; that influence and knowledge are functions of identity rather than agency and choice; that relationships are primarily transactional, self-interested, externally validated, and performative; that perceived moral transgressions should not be forgiven; that intellectual consensus is a synonym for correctness. With these lessons, she might be equipped to navigate professional environments that increasingly resemble college campuses. But her opportunities for intellectual exploration, self-discovery, friendship, and love will be commensurately diminished.

Experiences like Sophie's are very different. College will have taught her to embrace intellectual difference and challenge as an opportunity for gaining understanding. It will have allowed her to reveal herself authentically to friends and to embrace them in the fullness of their humanity—flaws and all. She will have learned to withstand contradiction, accept emotional discomfort, forgive others, and ask for forgiveness in turn. In doing so, she and her fellow graduates will be building the kind of positive relationships that form the solid basis of marriages, partnerships, leadership, and citizenship.

The task that now lies before American colleges and universities is to make Sophie's experience rather than Adi's the one our children can expect. \*