

The Decline of Civil Discourse: Will the Next Generation Speak Freely?



WHEN SAPIR invited me to write an essay on “cancel culture” at today’s universities, I was reluctant to accept. Why? Because I was afraid that I would run the risk of being, well, canceled. But as an ardent advocate of free speech and the open exchange of ideas, I decided I had to practice what I preached. Let the clicks and cliques fall where they may.

As a high-school student, I thought cancel culture existed solely in the domain of celebrities and newsmakers, broadcast and social media, consumer brands and large corporations. I first became aware of the phenomenon in its original context: A television show was canceled in response to a backlash after its star made an abhorrent comment. In another case, a product-endorsement contract was canceled ahead of a public outcry over the spokesperson’s reported

behavior. As similar cases became more common, I assumed that cancellations took place only in the realm of the famous.

Then I went to college.



At the start of my first year at the University of Chicago, I learned that cancel culture had infiltrated campus life. Students were being shunned for voicing an unpopular view in class. Or sent into social exile over a harmless pun. Or shamed for asking a question simply because they were of the “wrong” identity for the subject matter. My campus wasn’t unique—if anything, UChicago did more than almost any other university to defend principles of free speech. Friends at other universities recounted similar anecdotes.

This revelation was as bewildering as it was upsetting. The fundamental mission of a liberal-arts education is to promote diverse perspectives, thoughtful debate, intellectual growth, and, ideally, classmate camaraderie in the shared experience of it all. My university does a lot to support this objective. But students themselves are now stifling the university experience, using new forms of cyber-bullying that have terrible consequences for the targeted person and transform the campus community at large in intellectually crippling ways.

My first exposure to on-campus cancel culture began with a lunchtime conversation. A student at my table was describing the effects of gentrification on the neighborhood next to the one in which she grew up. A student at an adjacent table overheard the discussion. Rather than join in, she secretly recorded it. She then posted the video online with a caption deriding a “rich girl” for “talking gentrification,” even though the speaker expressed views that, as later became evident, were consistent with the shamer’s own opinions on the matter. What’s more, the student who was recorded attends college on a scholarship. She isn’t rich.

After the video was posted, the “rich girl” became a pariah. Students glared disdainfully as she walked by, acquaintances turned

their backs, and classmates gathered outside the lecture hall disbanded when she attempted to join them.

This kind of thing is not uncommon. Students can be targeted for something they said in a classroom or a social setting, censured online, and suddenly ostracized—or even accosted in person. And such character assassinations are usually committed in a “run-and-gun” fashion. A shamer quickly launches the attack via a mobile app or website and then moves on. Others see it, internalize the accusation, and also move on, now harboring and spreading scorn for the target. If cancel culture seems scary in professional settings, among (ostensible) adults, just imagine what it’s like on campus: The targeted person can be a roommate, a friend, an acquaintance, or a classmate. Even if it’s a stranger, the victims of campus cancellations are more visible, accessible, and therefore vulnerable to mistreatment than cancel-culture victims beyond the campus.

Then there is social media, which amplifies the harm of cancellation beyond the initial ambush, as everybody piles on online. Because the shamer’s social-media posting can be anonymous and disappear automatically, the target usually has no chance to respond directly with an explanation, a defense, or a correction. Even when such responses are posted, those already biased against the student are rarely interested in considering the other side of the story.

Worse are accusations that remain forever in the internet ether, ready to resurface with a simple Google search. We now live in a grim era where students face potential life sentences—whose penalties include social ostracism or academic and professional rejection—based on allegations that might be distorted or baseless. Even when they are true, they are usually in response to things the student wrote or said that were immature, ill-considered, or easy to misconstrue—these are young people, after all. Rather than serving as a learning opportunity, with the incident forgiven and soon forgotten, these mistakes become a digitized mark of Cain. It’s terrifying.

Devastating to the individual, cancellation also damages

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the academic environment. Fear of being canceled has a chilling effect on students in the classroom, extracurricular pursuits, social events, and everyday interactions on campus. Students have become hesitant to offer an opinion, pose a question, or take the other side of an argument—whether in earnest or just to explore an issue—lest they say something “wrong.” I count myself among them. I often raise my hand to weigh in on an engaging seminar topic, then quickly self-censor, lower my arm, and sheepishly slouch back in my chair. It isn’t worth the risk.

This dynamic takes on a life of its own. The shamers see that shaming works, so they become more aggressive, pushing for greater conformity. The rest of us are increasingly fearful, afraid to deviate from a norm whose boundaries, arbiters, and enforcement are shrouded in mystery and ever-shifting. It’s like navigating a minefield overlaid with trip wires: You gingerly tiptoe around the mines to keep on the correct path but still risk brushing against a hidden thread that triggers a blast of contempt.

The more that students are fearful about venturing beyond their comfort zones and cliques, the more the educational experience is degraded. Opinions aren’t challenged in classrooms or common spaces the way they should be. Trust between students erodes. The great banquet of ideas that a world-class academic experience is

meant to provide deteriorates into a diet of flavorless clichés and low-calorie conversations. It's not what college is supposed to be.



This situation is particularly disconcerting to me as a great-granddaughter of Holocaust survivors. I was raised to recognize and speak out against propaganda, groupthink, and public shaming. As a child studying Talmud, I came to appreciate the questioning form of its text, its embodiment of the principles that opposing views are entitled to receive full consideration and that people can agreeably disagree. These are the roots of my passion for constitutional law, especially its core tenets of free expression, due process and equal rights.

So how can cancel culture on campus be countered?

Outspoken contrarian voices by people in leadership positions—including, quite admirably, former University of Chicago President Robert Zimmer—are commendable, inspiring, helpful, and necessary. But they alone are insufficient to remedy the kind of deep-seated problem that a pervasive campus culture presents. They are, frankly, too few and too remote. Frightened students silently cheering them on won't change anything. Students who want a different, more robust, richer intellectual experience need to stop whispering among themselves. They need to speak out and come to one another's aid when anyone is attacked for speech that deserves dialogue and certainly is within the protections of the First Amendment.

The response to campus cancel culture will have to come from the ground up—from the students themselves. Speaking up, sharing opinions, debating ideas, and challenging prevailing norms must become not only allowable, but expected, respected, and rewarded. I don't mean this as an accommodation of unmistakable bigotry or as an incitement to violence. But the "Overton window" of acceptable discourse needs to become considerably wider. And

that, in turn, will require cultivating the skills of listening closely and giving others the benefit of the doubt, practicing agreeable disagreement, and fostering constructive dissent. In short, we need to replace cancel culture with what might be called "curiosity culture."

This won't be easy. As students, we are busy enough getting through school, planning for our summers, and thinking about what we want to do after graduation. And it can certainly seem that the rewards might not be worth the risk. Even as I finish this essay, I harbor serious doubts about hitting the "send" button. There may be consequences, and that makes me uncomfortable. But the people who have made me the person I am keep telling me that it's my turn to convert my fundamental beliefs into action.

They are right. It's time to raise my hand.

