

Instructions:

During Orientation this summer, you will participate in a Writing Placement Exam. For most of you, your essay will be used to determine which writing course(s) you will be required to take over your first year at the University. If your performance indicates you would benefit from two semesters of formal writing instruction, you will be advised to register for WRTG 105 in the fall and WRTG 106 in the spring. If your writing indicates that one semester of formal writing instruction should prepare you for success in college-level writing, you will be advised to register for WRTG 107 in either semester of your first year. If your essay demonstrates that you have already achieved college-level proficiency in both writing and argument, you will be excused from having to fulfill the University's General Education *Eloquentia Perfecta* Level 1: Foundational First-Year Writing requirement, which means that you will not be required to take a first-year writing course. It is imperative that you write to the best of your ability during the exam so that we place you in the course(s) that will best serve your needs.

Your task is to read carefully this excerpt from "The Coddling of the American Mind," by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt from the September 2015 issue of *The Atlantic*, an article that questions the need for political correctness and draws connections between it and emotional sensitivity among college students in the collegiate environment.

After carefully analyzing Lukianoff and Haidt's position and implications at home and in your student groups, you will be asked to draft and revise a 450- to 650-word essay that weighs in on the argument the authors present.

In your essay, identify Lukianoff and Haidt's claims and whether or not and to what extent you agree with them. Throughout your response, identify the evidence the authors offer to support, clarify, justify, and defend their premise. In conversation with their argument, take a stand on the issue by including details from Lukianoff and Haidt's article, analyzing these details, and offering examples from your own experience, observations, or independent reading to support your position. You will have 45 minutes to draft and revise your essay in a computer lab on campus.

You will not be required to provide a formal "Works Cited" list, but you should identify in your essay the source of any words or ideas that are not your own, including references to Lukianoff and Haidt's article. Integrate others' words or ideas into your own writing using phrases like "According to Lukianoff and Haidt ..." or "Lukianoff and Haidt explain that ..." to indicate the source of the information.

Your essay should be well organized and carefully and clearly written. It should also demonstrate a mastery of basic writing skills, a clear sense of your writing situation, a strong grasp of the issues discussed in the article, and the ability to develop an argument by making connections between your main idea and a logical series of secondary points.

The Writing Placement Exam will take place on the second day of your Summer Orientation visit, but you should read the Lukianoff and Haidt's essay at least once before you arrive on campus. You are welcome to prepare for the essay by doing further research (on-line or in the library), by doing pre-writing exercises or constructing an outline, even by discussing the topic or the article with your friends. Time will be set aside on the first day of Orientation for you to meet in small, student-run groups to discuss the content of the essay and strategies for responding to it. **However, when you write the essay itself, you will NOT be allowed to use your phone or the web or any written notes that you may have put together beforehand.**

Instructions for submitting your essay will be given during your Orientation testing session. Please note that **you will need your R-number (your University ID#)** to access our computer system, name your document file, and submit your essay. Please come to the exam with your R-number on hand.

Questions about the writing exam and placement process may be addressed to Dr. Teresa Grettano, Director of First-Year Writing, teresa.grettano@scranton.edu.

Welcome to The University of Scranton, and good luck!

Lukianoff, Greg and Jonathan Haidt. “The Coddling of the American Mind.” *The Atlantic*. Sept. 2015 issue.

Something strange is happening at America’s colleges and universities. A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense. Last December, Jeannie Suk wrote in an online article for *The New Yorker* about law students asking her fellow professors at Harvard not to teach rape law—or, in one case, even use the word *violate* (as in “that violates the law”) lest it cause students distress. In February, Laura Kipnis, a professor at Northwestern University, wrote an essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* describing a new campus politics of sexual paranoia—and was then subjected to a long investigation after students who were offended by the article and by a tweet she’d sent filed Title IX complaints against her. In June, a professor protecting himself with a pseudonym wrote an essay for Vox describing how gingerly he now has to teach. “I’m a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me,” the headline said. A number of popular comedians, including Chris Rock, have stopped performing on college campuses (see Caitlin Flanagan’s [article](#) in this month’s issue). Jerry Seinfeld and Bill Maher have publicly condemned the oversensitivity of college students, saying too many of them can’t take a joke.

Two terms have risen quickly from obscurity into common campus parlance. *Microaggressions* are small actions or word choices that seem on their face to have no malicious intent but that are thought of as a kind of violence nonetheless. For example, by some campus guidelines, it is a microaggression to ask an Asian American or Latino American “Where were you born?” because this implies that he or she is not a real American. *Trigger warnings* are alerts that professors are expected to issue if something in a course might cause a strong emotional response. For example, some students have called for warnings that Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* describes racial violence and that F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* portrays misogyny and physical abuse, so that students who have

been previously victimized by racism or domestic violence can choose to avoid these works, which they believe might “trigger” a recurrence of past trauma.

Some recent campus actions border on the surreal. In April, at Brandeis University, the Asian American student association sought to raise awareness of microaggressions against Asians through an installation on the steps of an academic hall. The installation gave examples of microaggressions such as “Aren’t you supposed to be good at math?” and “I’m colorblind! I don’t see race.” But a backlash arose among other Asian American students, who felt that the display itself was a microaggression. The association removed the installation, and its president wrote an e-mail to the entire student body apologizing to anyone who was “triggered or hurt by the content of the microaggressions.”

According to the most-basic tenets of psychology, helping people with anxiety disorders avoid the things they fear is misguided.

This new climate is slowly being institutionalized, and is affecting what can be said in the classroom, even as a basis for discussion. During the 2014–15 school year, for instance, the deans and department chairs at the 10 University of California system schools were presented by administrators at faculty leader-training sessions with examples of microaggressions. The list of offensive statements included: “America is the land of opportunity” and “I believe the most qualified person should get the job.”

The press has typically described these developments as a resurgence of political correctness. That’s partly right, although there are important differences between what’s happening now and what happened in the 1980s and ’90s. That movement sought to restrict speech (specifically hate speech aimed at marginalized groups), but it also challenged the literary, philosophical, and historical canon, seeking to widen it by including more-diverse perspectives. The current movement is largely about emotional well-being. More than

the last, it presumes an extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche, and therefore elevates the goal of protecting students from psychological harm. The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into “safe spaces” where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable. And more than the last, this movement seeks to punish anyone who interferes with that aim, even accidentally. You might call this impulse *vindictive protectiveness*. It is creating a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse.

We have been studying this development for a while now, with rising alarm. (Greg Lukianoff is a constitutional lawyer and the president and CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which defends free speech and academic freedom on campus, and has advocated for students and faculty involved in many of the incidents this article describes; Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist who studies the American culture wars. The stories of how we each came to this subject can be read [here](#).) The dangers that these trends pose to scholarship and to the quality of American universities are significant; we could write a whole essay detailing them. But in this essay we focus on a different question: What are the effects of this new protectiveness *on the students themselves*? Does it benefit the people it is supposed to help? What exactly are students learning when they spend four years or more in a community that polices unintentional slights, places warning labels on works of classic literature, and in many other ways conveys the sense that words can be forms of violence that require strict control by campus authorities, who are expected to act as both protectors and prosecutors?

There’s a saying common in education circles: Don’t teach students *what* to think; teach them *how* to think. The idea goes back at least as far as Socrates. Today, what we call the Socratic method is a way of teaching that fosters critical thinking, in part by encouraging students to question their own unexamined beliefs, as well as the received

wisdom of those around them. Such questioning sometimes leads to discomfort, and even to anger, on the way to understanding.

But vindictive protectiveness teaches students to think in a very different way. It prepares them poorly for professional life, which often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong. The harm may be more immediate, too. A campus culture devoted to policing speech and punishing speakers is likely to engender patterns of thought that are surprisingly similar to those long identified by cognitive behavioral therapists as causes of depression and anxiety. The new protectiveness may be teaching students to think pathologically.

How Did We Get Here?

It’s difficult to know exactly why vindictive protectiveness has burst forth so powerfully in the past few years. The phenomenon may be related to recent changes in the interpretation of federal antidiscrimination statutes (about which more later). But the answer probably involves generational shifts as well. Childhood itself has changed greatly during the past generation. Many Baby Boomers and Gen Xers can remember riding their bicycles around their hometowns, unchaperoned by adults, by the time they were 8 or 9 years old. In the hours after school, kids were expected to occupy themselves, getting into minor scrapes and learning from their experiences. But “free range” childhood became less common in the 1980s. The surge in crime from the ’60s through the early ’90s made Baby Boomer parents more protective than their own parents had been. Stories of abducted children appeared more frequently in the news, and in 1984, images of them began showing up on milk cartons. In response, many parents pulled in the reins and worked harder to keep their children safe.

The flight to safety also happened at school. Dangerous play structures were removed from playgrounds; peanut butter was banned from student lunches. After the 1999 Columbine massacre in Colorado, many schools cracked down on bullying, implementing

“zero tolerance” policies. In a variety of ways, children born after 1980—the Millennials—got a consistent message from adults: life is dangerous, but adults will do everything in their power to protect you from harm, not just from strangers but from one another as well.

These same children grew up in a culture that was (and still is) becoming more politically polarized. Republicans and Democrats have never particularly liked each other, but survey data going back to the 1970s show that on average, their mutual dislike used to be surprisingly mild. Negative feelings have grown steadily stronger, however, particularly since the early 2000s. Political scientists call this process “affective partisan polarization,” and it is a very serious problem for any democracy. As each side increasingly demonizes the other, compromise becomes more difficult. A recent study shows that implicit or unconscious biases are now at least as strong across political parties as they are across races.

So it’s not hard to imagine why students arriving on campus today might be more desirous of protection and more hostile toward ideological opponents than in generations past. This hostility, and the self-righteousness fueled by strong partisan emotions, can be expected to add force to any moral crusade. A principle of moral psychology is that “morality binds and blinds.” Part of what we do when we make moral judgments is express allegiance to a team. But that can interfere with our ability to think critically. Acknowledging that the other side’s viewpoint has any merit is risky—your teammates may see you as a traitor.

Social media makes it extraordinarily easy to join crusades, express solidarity and outrage, and shun traitors. Facebook was founded in 2004, and since 2006 it has allowed children as young as 13 to join. This means that the first wave of students who spent all their teen years using Facebook reached college in 2011, and graduated from college only this year.

These first true “social-media natives” may be different from members of previous generations in how they go about sharing their moral judgments and supporting one another in moral campaigns and conflicts. We find much to like about these trends; young people today are engaged with one another, with news stories, and with prosocial endeavors to a greater degree than when the dominant technology was television. But social media has also fundamentally shifted the balance of power in relationships between students and faculty; the latter increasingly fear what students might do to their reputations and careers by stirring up online mobs against them.

We do not mean to imply simple causation, but rates of mental illness in young adults have been rising, both on campus and off, in recent decades. Some portion of the increase is surely due to better diagnosis and greater willingness to seek help, but most experts seem to agree that some portion of the trend is real. Nearly all of the campus mental-health directors surveyed in 2013 by the American College Counseling Association reported that the number of students with severe psychological problems was rising at their schools. The rate of emotional distress reported by students themselves is also high, and rising. In a 2014 survey by the American College Health Association, 54 percent of college students surveyed said that they had “felt overwhelming anxiety” in the past 12 months, up from 49 percent in the same survey just five years earlier. Students seem to be reporting more emotional crises; many seem fragile, and this has surely changed the way university faculty and administrators interact with them. The question is whether some of those changes might be doing more harm than good.

The Thinking Cure

For millennia, philosophers have understood that we don’t see life as it is; we see a version distorted by our hopes, fears, and other attachments. The Buddha said, “Our life is the creation of our mind.” Marcus Aurelius said, “Life itself is but what you deem it.” The quest for wisdom in many traditions begins with this insight. Early Buddhists and the Stoics, for example, developed practices for

reducing attachments, thinking more clearly, and finding release from the emotional torments of normal mental life.

Cognitive behavioral therapy is a modern embodiment of this ancient wisdom. It is the most extensively studied nonpharmaceutical treatment of mental illness, and is used widely to treat depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and addiction. It can even be of help to schizophrenics. No other form of psychotherapy has been shown to work for a broader range of problems. Studies have generally found that it is as effective as antidepressant drugs (such as Prozac) in the treatment of anxiety and depression. The therapy is relatively quick and easy to learn; after a few months of training, many patients can do it on their own. Unlike drugs, cognitive behavioral therapy keeps working long after treatment is stopped, because it teaches thinking skills that people can continue to use.

The goal is to minimize distorted thinking and see the world more accurately. You start by learning the names of the dozen or so most common cognitive distortions (such as overgeneralizing, discounting positives, and emotional reasoning; see the list [at the bottom of this article](#)). Each time you notice yourself falling prey to one of them, you name it, describe the facts of the situation, consider alternative interpretations, and then choose an interpretation of events more in line with those facts. Your emotions follow your new interpretation. In time, this process becomes automatic. When people improve their mental hygiene in this way—when they free themselves from the repetitive irrational thoughts that had previously filled so much of their consciousness—they become less depressed, anxious, and angry.

The parallel to formal education is clear: cognitive behavioral therapy teaches good critical-thinking skills, the sort that educators have striven for so long to impart. By almost any definition, critical thinking requires grounding one's beliefs in evidence rather than in emotion or desire, and learning how to search for and evaluate evidence that might contradict one's initial hypothesis. But does

campus life today foster critical thinking? Or does it coax students to think in more-distorted ways?

Let's look at recent trends in higher education in light of the distortions that cognitive behavioral therapy identifies. We will draw the names and descriptions of these distortions from David D. Burns's popular book *Feeling Good*, as well as from the second edition of *Treatment Plans and Interventions for Depression and Anxiety Disorders*, by Robert L. Leahy, Stephen J. F. Holland, and Lata K. McGinn.

Higher Education's Embrace of "Emotional Reasoning"

Burns defines *emotional reasoning* as assuming "that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: 'I feel it, therefore it must be true.'" Leahy, Holland, and McGinn define it as letting "your feelings guide your interpretation of reality." But, of course, subjective feelings are not always trustworthy guides; unrestrained, they can cause people to lash out at others who have done nothing wrong. Therapy often involves talking yourself down from the idea that each of your emotional responses represents something true or important.

Emotional reasoning dominates many campus debates and discussions. A claim that someone's words are "offensive" is not just an expression of one's own subjective feeling of offendedness. It is, rather, a public charge that the speaker has done something objectively wrong. It is a demand that the speaker apologize or be punished by some authority for committing an offense.

There have always been some people who believe they have a right not to be offended. Yet throughout American history—from the Victorian era to the free-speech activism of the 1960s and '70s—radicals have pushed boundaries and mocked prevailing sensibilities. Sometime in the 1980s, however, college campuses began to focus on preventing offensive speech, especially speech that might be

hurtful to women or minority groups. The sentiment underpinning this goal was laudable, but it quickly produced some absurd results.

What are we doing to our students if we encourage them to develop extra-thin skin just before they leave the cocoon of adult protection?

Among the most famous early examples was the so-called water-buffalo incident at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1993, the university charged an Israeli-born student with racial harassment after he yelled “Shut up, you water buffalo!” to a crowd of black sorority women that was making noise at night outside his dorm-room window. Many scholars and pundits at the time could not see how the term *water buffalo* (a rough translation of a Hebrew insult for a thoughtless or rowdy person) was a racial slur against African Americans, and as a result, the case became international news.

Claims of a right not to be offended have continued to arise since then, and universities have continued to privilege them. In a particularly egregious 2008 case, for instance, Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis found a white student guilty of racial harassment for reading a book titled *Notre Dame vs. the Klan*. The book honored student opposition to the Ku Klux Klan when it marched on Notre Dame in 1924. Nonetheless, the picture of a Klan rally on the book’s cover offended at least one of the student’s co-workers (he was a janitor as well as a student), and that was enough for a guilty finding by the university’s Affirmative Action Office.

These examples may seem extreme, but the reasoning behind them has become more commonplace on campus in recent years. Last year, at the University of St. Thomas, in Minnesota, an event called Hump Day, which would have allowed people to pet a camel, was abruptly canceled. Students had created a Facebook group where they protested the event for animal cruelty, for being a waste of money, and for being insensitive to people from the Middle East. The inspiration for the camel had almost certainly come from a popular TV commercial in which a camel saunters around an office on a

Wednesday, celebrating “hump day”; it was devoid of any reference to Middle Eastern peoples. Nevertheless, the group organizing the event announced on its Facebook page that the event would be canceled because the “program [was] dividing people and would make for an uncomfortable and possibly unsafe environment.”

Because there is a broad ban in academic circles on “blaming the victim,” it is generally considered unacceptable to question the reasonableness (let alone the sincerity) of someone’s emotional state, particularly if those emotions are linked to one’s group identity. The thin argument “I’m offended” becomes an unbeatable trump card. This leads to what Jonathan Rauch, a contributing editor at this magazine, calls the “offendedness sweepstakes,” in which opposing parties use claims of offense as cudgels. In the process, the bar for what we consider unacceptable speech is lowered further and further.

Since 2013, new pressure from the federal government has reinforced this trend. Federal antidiscrimination statutes regulate on-campus harassment and unequal treatment based on sex, race, religion, and national origin. Until recently, the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights acknowledged that speech must be “objectively offensive” before it could be deemed actionable as sexual harassment—it would have to pass the “reasonable person” test. To be prohibited, the office wrote in 2003, allegedly harassing speech would have to go “beyond the mere expression of views, words, symbols or thoughts that some person finds offensive.”

But in 2013, the Departments of Justice and Education greatly broadened the definition of sexual harassment to include verbal conduct that is simply “unwelcome.” Out of fear of federal investigations, universities are now applying that standard—defining unwelcome speech as harassment—not just to sex, but to race, religion, and veteran status as well. Everyone is supposed to rely upon his or her own subjective feelings to decide whether a comment by a professor or a fellow student is unwelcome, and therefore

grounds for a harassment claim. Emotional reasoning is now accepted as evidence.

If our universities are teaching students that their emotions can be used effectively as weapons—or at least as evidence in administrative proceedings—then they are teaching students to nurture a kind of hypersensitivity that will lead them into countless drawn-out conflicts in college and beyond. Schools may be training students in thinking styles that will damage their careers and friendships, along with their mental health.

[Sections “Fotrune-Telling and Trigger Warnings” to “What Can We Do Now” have been cut from the original document]

What Can We Do Now?

Attempts to shield students from words, ideas, and people that might cause them emotional discomfort are bad for the students. They are bad for the workplace, which will be mired in unending litigation if student expectations of safety are carried forward. And they are bad for American democracy, which is already paralyzed by worsening partisanship. When the ideas, values, and speech of the other side are seen not just as wrong but as willfully aggressive toward innocent victims, it is hard to imagine the kind of mutual respect, negotiation, and compromise that are needed to make politics a positive-sum game.

Rather than trying to protect students from words and ideas that they will inevitably encounter, colleges should do all they can to equip students to thrive in a world full of words and ideas that they cannot control. One of the great truths taught by Buddhism (and Stoicism, Hinduism, and many other traditions) is that you can never achieve happiness by making the world conform to your desires. But you can master your desires and habits of thought. This, of course, is the goal of cognitive behavioral therapy. With this in mind, here are some steps that might help reverse the tide of bad thinking on campus.

The biggest single step in the right direction does not involve faculty or university administrators, but rather the federal government, which should release universities from their fear of unreasonable investigation and sanctions by the Department of Education. Congress should define peer-on-peer harassment according to the Supreme Court’s definition in the 1999 case *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education*. The *Davis* standard holds that a single comment or thoughtless remark by a student does not equal harassment; harassment requires a pattern of objectively offensive behavior by one student that interferes with another student’s access to education. Establishing the *Davis* standard would help eliminate universities’ impulse to police their students’ speech so carefully.

Universities themselves should try to raise consciousness about the need to balance freedom of speech with the need to make all students feel welcome. Talking openly about such conflicting but important values is just the sort of challenging exercise that any diverse but tolerant community must learn to do. Restrictive speech codes should be abandoned.

Universities should also officially and strongly discourage trigger warnings. They should endorse the American Association of University Professors’ report on these warnings, which notes, “The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual.” Professors should be free to use trigger warnings if they choose to do so, but by explicitly discouraging the practice, universities would help fortify the faculty against student requests for such warnings. Finally, universities should rethink the skills and values they most want to impart to their incoming students. At present, many freshman-orientation programs try to raise student sensitivity to a nearly impossible level. Teaching students to avoid giving unintentional offense is a worthy goal, especially when the students come from many different cultural backgrounds. But students should also be taught how to live in a world full of potential offenses. Why not teach incoming students how to practice cognitive behavioral

therapy? Given high and rising rates of mental illness, this simple step would be among the most humane and supportive things a university could do. The cost and time commitment could be kept low: a few group training sessions could be supplemented by Web sites or apps. But the outcome could pay dividends in many ways. For example, a shared vocabulary about reasoning, common distortions, and the appropriate use of evidence to draw conclusions would facilitate critical thinking and real debate. It would also tone down the perpetual state of outrage that seems to engulf some colleges these days, allowing students' minds to open more widely to new ideas and new people. A greater commitment to formal, public debate on campus—and to the assembly of a more politically diverse faculty—would further serve that goal.

Thomas Jefferson, upon founding the University of Virginia, said: This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it.

We believe that this is still—and will always be—the best attitude for American universities. Faculty, administrators, students, and the federal government all have a role to play in restoring universities to their historic mission.

Common Cognitive Distortions

A partial list from Robert L. Leahy, Stephen J. F. Holland, and Lata K. McGinn's Treatment Plans and Interventions for Depression and Anxiety Disorders (2012).

1. Mind reading. You assume that you know what people think without having sufficient evidence of their thoughts. “He thinks I’m a loser.”

2. Fortune-telling. You predict the future negatively: things will get worse, or there is danger ahead. “I’ll fail that exam,” or “I won’t get the job.”

3. Catastrophizing. You believe that what has happened or will happen will be so awful and unbearable that you won’t be able to stand it. “It would be terrible if I failed.”

4. Labeling. You assign global negative traits to yourself and others. “I’m undesirable,” or “He’s a rotten person.”

5. Discounting positives. You claim that the positive things you or others do are trivial. “That’s what wives are supposed to do—so it doesn’t count when she’s nice to me,” or “Those successes were easy, so they don’t matter.”

6. Negative filtering. You focus almost exclusively on the negatives and seldom notice the positives. “Look at all of the people who don’t like me.”

7. Overgeneralizing. You perceive a global pattern of negatives on the basis of a single incident. “This generally happens to me. I seem to fail at a lot of things.”

8. Dichotomous thinking. You view events or people in all-or-nothing terms. “I get rejected by everyone,” or “It was a complete waste of time.”

9. Blaming. You focus on the other person as the source of your negative feelings, and you refuse to take responsibility for changing yourself. “She’s to blame for the way I feel now,” or “My parents caused all my problems.”

10. What if? You keep asking a series of questions about “what if” something happens, and you fail to be satisfied with any of the answers. “Yeah, but what if I get anxious?,” or “What if I can’t catch my breath?”

11. Emotional reasoning. You let your feelings guide your interpretation of reality. “I feel depressed; therefore, my marriage is not working out.”

12. Inability to disconfirm. You reject any evidence or arguments that might contradict your negative thoughts. For example, when you have the thought *I’m unlovable*, you reject as irrelevant any evidence that people like you. Consequently, your thought cannot be refuted. “That’s not the real issue. There are deeper problems. There are other factors.”