

Academic freedom, open discussion, constructive disagreement, and student resilience

We applaud the members of the Academic Futures committee for their hard work and ambitious vision for the future of our campus. We are excited to see concrete recommendations around important objectives such as interdisciplinarity, experiential learning, online education, and inclusive excellence.

We wish to suggest that the revised report also explicitly reaffirm the importance of academic freedom, open discussion, constructive disagreement, and student resilience to the future of CU. These values are foundational to an academically ambitious and rigorous campus. They are also essential to fostering harmony in a socio-culturally and intellectually diverse community—and thus critical to inclusive excellence. Finally, they are beneficial to student mental health, and essential preparation for the challenging ideas and situations our graduates will face in the real world.

At a recent town hall, one of us was told that some of these values were not mentioned in the original report because they are so core to CU's mission and identity that the Academic Futures committee took them as given. We agree that CU is committed to these values, and we applaud CU's leadership in this regard through, for instance, [the Regents' recent statement on free expression](#) and through protecting "political affiliation/political philosophy" in [CU's discrimination and harassment policy](#).

However, rightly or wrongly, recent polls clearly show that a large fraction of the country is skeptical of universities' current commitment to the above values (see Figures 1-3 below). We can understand why some people have these concerns, in light of recent climate surveys and incidents of censorship at other universities, which go far beyond students occasionally shouting down controversial right-wing speakers. For instance, in just the past month, reports have surfaced of academic papers in [public health](#) and [mathematics](#) being censored in response to pressure from activists who found the papers' findings politically objectionable. A 2012 survey of hundreds of academic social psychologists found 37% *state explicitly* that they were between "somewhat" and "very much" willing to discriminate against conservatives in hiring. [A 2015 experiment](#) found both liberals and conservatives more willing to discriminate against each other in selecting scholarship winners than to discriminate based on race. A [2017 campus climate survey](#) found that most students of all stripes are uncomfortable sharing their political views in class, especially conservative, moderate, and libertarian students (Figure 1).

Think about being at your school in a class that was discussing a controversial issue about POLITICS. How comfortable or reluctant would you feel about speaking up and giving your views on this topic?

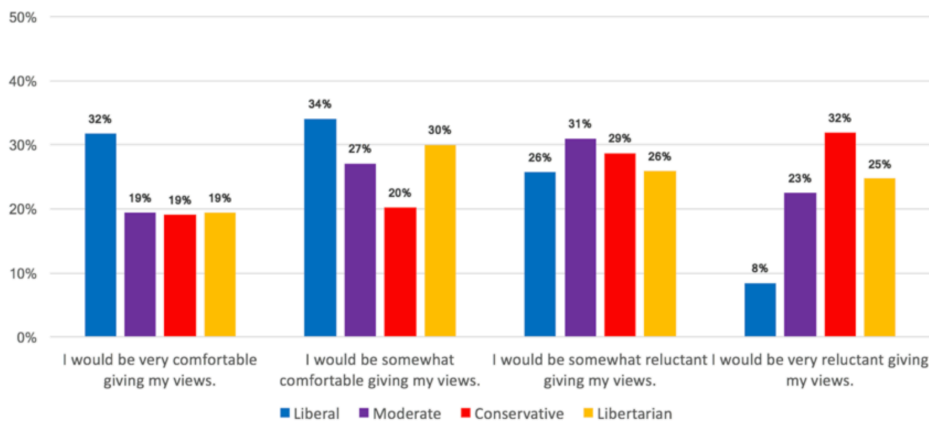


Figure 1. [Heterodox Academy 2017](#).

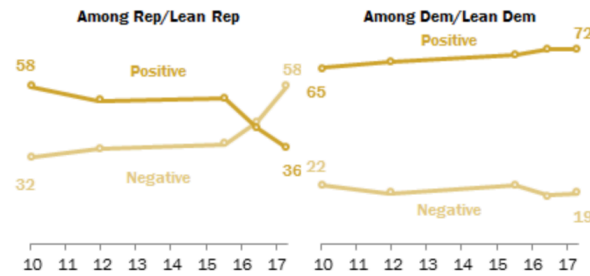
As Haidt and Lukianoff document in their new book, *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018, Penguin; summary [here](#)), these incidents are related to larger trends of students being taught well-intentioned but misguided ideas in schools and popular culture, which Haidt and Lukianoff call the "three Great Untruths": 1) "what doesn't kill you makes you weaker" (e.g., the notion that offensive words

constitute violence); 2) “always trust your feelings” (e.g., that perception of intent matters more than intent when judging an offense); and 3) “life is a battle between good and evil people” (i.e., binary thinking: that people are entirely good or bad, with us or against us, oppressors or oppressed, etc.). As Haidt and Lukianoff point out, these ideas run counter to best practices in cognitive behavioral therapy, best practices for rigorous dialogue and constructive disagreement, and best practices for fostering harmony in diverse communities. To put it more succinctly, an intellectually vibrant and socio-culturally diverse community is necessarily one in which people will encounter ideas they find challenging or objectionable. We should be preparing our students to thrive and be resilient in such communities.

The trends Haidt and Lukianoff describe have had clear negative effects on public opinion of universities. Since 2010, the fraction of Republicans who think universities have a positive effect on the country has dropped from 54% to 36%, [according to Pew Research](#) (Figure 2). Another [Pew poll from this past summer](#) found that 73% of Republicans and 52% of Democrats think universities are headed in the wrong direction. The main reasons Republicans (as well as some Democrats) gave for this opinion are that (Figure 3): classrooms have become too politicized (to the left); universities show too much concern about protecting students from views they might find offensive; and students are not getting the skills they need to succeed in the workplace. [A Gallup poll from 2017](#) found similar results. Regardless of whether each of us agrees with these statements, we should all be very concerned that half the country is turning against universities. As a public university, especially as a public university in a purple state, these trends represent an existential threat.

Since 2015, sharp rise in share of Republicans saying colleges have a negative effect on the country

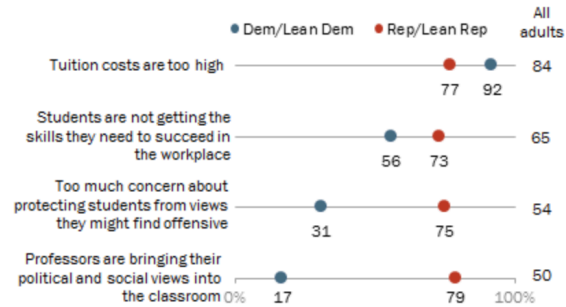
% who say colleges and universities have a ___ effect on the way things are going in the country



Note: Don't know/Other responses not shown.
Source: Survey conducted June 8-18, 2017.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Vast divide between Republicans and Democrats on reasons behind negative views of higher education

% saying each is a major reason why the higher education system is going in the wrong direction, among those who think it is going in the wrong direction



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 19-July 2, 2018.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2. [Pew Research 2017](#).

Figure 3. [Pew Research 2018](#).

Outside forces (e.g., right-wing media) undoubtedly have also contributed to the polarized views on universities. But this does not diminish the fact that we can only gain—in both perception and practice—by reaffirming and continuing to focus on values that we already believe to be core to our mission.

In summary, though we recognize the many ways in which CU is already a leader on academic freedom, open discussion, constructive disagreement, and student resilience, we think it would serve us well to explicitly reaffirm our commitment these values in the “What it means to be a public university today” section of the revised Academic Futures report. We thank the committee for their consideration, and for their excellent work thus far.

Respectfully,

Heterodox Academy members: Matthew Burgess (Environmental Studies), Robert Pasnau (Philosophy)