Approaches to Discussing Controversial Issues in Higher Education

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Abstract:

In this project, I will explore how college educators can facilitate open-minded, respectful, and inclusive conversations of controversial issues, with the hope that my research will help educators and students alike break down barriers of communication and learn from others’ experiences that differ from their own. A central focus of my work will be how universities can utilize the diversity of their campuses to enhance student learning and development. A diverse student body is only as powerful as the strength of its interactions—that is, students only stand to benefit from living in a diverse campus community if they possess the tools and support to engage with peers whose backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs differ from their own. Universities can and should provide these supports to students, both by endowing them with the ability to critically analyze arguments and engage in civil discourse, as well as by supporting the voices of minority students whose experiences of higher education differ from majority students.

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Approaches to Discussing Controversial Issues in Higher Education

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Introduction

I am the daughter of two polar opposite parents. My father, an engineer at Northrop Grumman, is a registered Republican and lifelong Christian who attends one of our most conservative local churches, Grace Baptist. My mother, on the other hand, is an agnostic, opera-loving musician who has never once voted for a Republican candidate (and “in today’s political climate, wouldn’t dream of it”). When I describe my parents to other people, they often look at me with confusion. How can two people who share so little in common possibly get along, let alone be married to one another? How does that even work?

I can say from experience that it doesn’t. Growing up in my household, our family was very rarely able to discuss controversial issues in politics, religion, or current events without shouting at each other. This dynamic was exacerbated in election years, when we could not turn on the news without fighting over how much time we could devote to MSNBC before we would watch Fox. To avoid unnecessary tension, our family policy became that of silence--to avoid discussions of controversial topics, not just at the dinner table but all the time. If I wanted to learn more about a pressing issue, I would have to speak to my parents individually, and expect to receive heavily biased answers.

While I cannot say our family dynamic was ideal, I can say that it had its unexpected upsides. As a direct result of my family’s polarity, I grew up with an understanding of arguments from both sides of the aisle. I became a strange hybrid of my parents--a sort of liberally-minded Christian with spotty church attendance and a solidly blue voting record. I am able to converse comfortably with the conservative firebrands I meet at church and the vegan environmentalists I meet at my mother’s Indivisible meetings. I enjoy playing devil’s advocate and arguing issues from both sides. Ironically, or perhaps unsurprisingly, I chose to major in political science. But
perhaps the most significant consequence was that, after years of playing the mediator in my own family, I have found that I have become biased towards compromise. It gives me a sense of fulfillment to draw out the strengths in two different lines of thinking, and to help people understand the value of each other’s arguments and reach some sort of agreement.

This is my motivation in pursuing my capstone project which will explore how universities can improve campus conversations of controversial issues. Having been a sophomore during the 2015 protests at Yale and a number of other schools, campus activism and unrest has played a definitive role in my college experience. The conversations we had as a community about race, inequality, discrimination, and freedom of speech in 2015 have stuck with me over the course of my undergraduate career and have colored my perception of this moment in our nation’s history. I have seen how deeply these discussions impacted our student body as a whole and I have watched how other universities have experienced similar periods of unrest as students grapple with the growing polarization, issues of inequality, and questions of identity that we are facing on a national scale. I know firsthand the critical role that controversy can play in shaping students’ worldviews and catalyzing their personal and intellectual development.

But I also know how discussions of controversial issues can go awry. During the 2015 protests at Yale, I watched as our campus became divided over issues of free speech and support for students of marginalized groups. I witnessed friend groups break apart as students felt compelled to take sides. Many of the town halls and group discussions I attended ended in shouting or tears. While the protests prompted our community to engage in serious reflection over the history of racism and discrimination at our university, resulting in a number of significant reforms, they also marked a time of serious division and upheaval for the Yale
community. In many ways, the conversations I witnessed during this time reminded me of my own family dynamic, in which discussions of controversial issues would end in shouting, shaming, or silence.

In the years since 2015, I have witnessed more activism and unrest, both on college campuses and throughout the nation, in reaction to ever-growing polarization over controversial issues. I have felt a deep-seated desire to alleviate this polarization--to help people of starkly different worldviews communicate about the issues that are important to them without shutting each other down. While this may be an impossible task on a national scale, I see my capstone project as an opportunity to explore a matter of great importance to me within the confines of higher education and college campuses.

**Research Questions and Methodology**

In this project, I will explore how college educators can facilitate open-minded, respectful, and inclusive conversations of controversial issues, with the hope that my research will help educators and students alike break down barriers of communication and learn from others’ experiences that differ from their own. A central focus of my work will be how universities can utilize the diversity of their campuses to enhance student learning and development. A diverse student body is only as powerful as the strength of its interactions—that is, students only stand to benefit from living in a diverse campus community if they possess the tools and support to engage with peers whose backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs differ from their own. Universities can and should provide these supports to students, both by endowing them with the ability to critically analyze arguments and engage in civil discourse, as well as by supporting the voices of minority students whose experiences of higher education differ from
majority students.

I include a focus on minority student experiences of college because minority students experience challenges on campus that majority students do not—they engage with a system that does not acknowledge the ways in which their identity colors their experience of higher education, and with a campus community that is sometimes openly hostile and discriminatory towards them (Watson et al. 2002; Quaye, Harper 2014). If universities do not actively work to support minority students in the unique challenges they face throughout their college education, then these students are at risk of experiencing developmental stasis or regression as a function of the level of “challenge” being disproportionate to the level of “support.” This is evidenced by the higher incidence of mental and physical health issues that minority students experience in college, as well as a graduation rate that is 14 points lower on average than that of majority students (Camera 2015).

Universities must offer this particularly vulnerable population the unique supports that they require in order to promote minority students’ developmental growth at a rate equivalent to that of majority students. This is especially important if universities are committed to the free exchange of ideas between members of a diverse campus: minority students’ tendency to create counter spaces in which they can seek out support from peers who share their backgrounds leads to a cycle of self-segregation, which counteracts university missions to facilitate multicultural interactions between a diverse campus body (Solorzano, Villapando 1998). This, in turn, prevents students from encountering and engaging with worldviews that differ from their own, which then stymies developmental learning for the student body as a whole.

In this study, I ask: how can universities facilitate discussions of controversial issues in a way that both encourages students to engage with those who disagree with them, but also ensures
that underrepresented voices are especially empowered to participate? In order to answer this question, I pose three additional research questions: 1) How can research on developmental learning and the minority student experience of college inform our knowledge of how students learn and engage with controversy? Moreover, 2) how could an understanding of student development and identity shape university practices in managing campus unrest and facilitating discussions of sensitive topics? And finally, 3) how have universities attempted to support students in engaging with controversy and how could they improve?

To elaborate on these questions, I begin by providing a background of the problem--that universities are struggling to manage student responses to controversy. This review covers the history of recent unrest on college campuses and explores explanations for why this unrest has escalated in recent years. Next, I discuss how university administrators and educators have struggled to respond to students as they grapple with controversial issues and briefly explain why institutions of higher education should actively engage students with conflicting ideas and a diversity of opinions. Here I claim that in order for universities to fulfill their claimed purposes for higher, liberal education, they must necessarily support students in the challenge of navigating conflict and controversy.

To further substantiate this point, I offer a review of the literature on developmental learning theory which can serve as a lens through which we understand student responses to controversy and how conflict influences learning. In this section, I accentuate how theories of developmental learning and concomitant research help to explain the problem--that is, the ways in which universities are struggling to manage student reactions to controversy--as well as act as a foundation for developing solutions to the problem. Next, I review the research on how minority students experience college, with a particular focus on how identity influences student
participation in conversations of controversial issues. Here I emphasize how issues of identity and student development cannot be considered separately—in other words, universities cannot facilitate developmental and transformative learning without taking into account the ways in which students’ backgrounds and identities color their educational experience. This is especially applicable to the minority students, who are particularly vulnerable to experiencing developmental stasis or regression as a consequence of the unique challenges they face on campus.

Following my review of the literature, I offer recommendations for how universities could manage campus unrest and student responses to controversy in light of the research on developmental learning and minority student experiences of college. I then provide brief case studies of universities that have dealt with recent campus unrest and their responses to highlight how these campuses have successfully engaged students in discussions of controversial issues in ways that benefit their intellectual and developmental growth, both through university-wide reforms and in the classroom context. In addition, I discuss the ways in which campuses are failing to support students as they grapple with controversy and conflict. I focus in particular on the pervasive absence of an understanding of developmental theory throughout institutions of higher education, and how universities could benefit from a more comprehensive awareness of student development as they confront campus unrest.

The ultimate goal of this project is to help universities facilitate discussions of controversial issues in a way that encourages students to engage with those who disagree with them, but especially ensures that underrepresented voices are empowered to participate. The strategies I highlight in this paper might serve to help universities manage student responses to
controversy in a way that reflects what we know about patterns of developmental learning in college students and takes into consideration students’ diverse backgrounds and experiences.

**Review of recent campus unrest**

The past several years have been a period of marked upheaval for university campuses across the nation. Beginning in 2012, a high volume of high profile figures declined their invitations to speak at university commencements, citing student backlash as their reason for withdrawal (Jackson 2016). At Rutgers University, for example, students protested the selection of Condoleeza Rice as a graduation speaker due to her involvement with the Iraq War. Similar scenarios occurred with other commencement and presentation speakers-to-be, such as former World Bank president Robert Zoellick (Swarthmore College), managing director of the IMF Christine Lagarde (Smith College), comedian Ben Stein (University of Vermont), and Hillary Clinton (College of St. Catherine in Minnesota) (Evans 2014; Zezima 2014; Jackson 2016). Often, students took issue with speakers’ stances on political and social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, evolution, the War on Terror, immigration, and financial policy. When controversial figures did accept invitations to speak, most universities responded by “doing their utmost to protect the free speech rights of those who wish[ed] to share their opinions, while ensuring the dignity of the Commencement ceremony [was] maintained” (Lempert 2014). Their efforts often included reminding students of their right to peacefully protest controversial speakers, such as by wearing signs over their robes or turning their chairs away from the stage to demonstrate their disapproval.

Controversies over commencement speakers, while prevalent since 2012, are far from unusual. College campuses have a history of being hotbeds for political and social activism, and
students have long protested speakers they disagree with (Valocchi 2010; Thomas, Gismondi 2017). But in the wake of the Ferguson protests and the early days of the Black Lives Matter movement, the controversies on college campuses grew more serious. Universities across the nation were swept by a wave of demonstrations centered on issues of racism and discrimination (Green, Wong 2016). At the University of Missouri, students engaged in hunger strikes, held walkouts, and organized rallies to protest the state of race relations on campus (Green, Wong 2016). They demanded the resignations of the university president and chancellor, both of which they received. At Yale University, protests broke out in response to an email written by a college professor, Erika Christakis, who questioned the administration’s decision to discourage students from wearing culturally insensitive costumes (Worland 2015). Both Christakis and her husband left their posts at the end of the year. In a similar case, students interpreted an email by the dean of students at Claremont McKenna as offensive, compelling her to resign amid campus-wide protests (Watanabe 2015).

Elsewhere, students called for the removal of statues and the renaming of buildings, programs, and titles. As Harvard and Yale replaced the title of “master” with “heads of college,” Princeton debated whether to strip the name Woodrow Wilson from one of its graduate schools (Green, Wong 2016). Students at UC Berkeley demanded that “Barrows Hall,” named for a former university president, be renamed for the former black panther and member of the Black Liberation Army Assata Shakur. At the College of William and Mary, students called for the removal of a statue of Thomas Jefferson, which was found covered in sticky notes reading “racist,” “rapist,” and “pedophile” (Green, Wong 2016). The statue remains standing at the university but has been defaced several times in the past year.
In 2016, the state of national politics intensified controversy on college campuses across the nation. Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 election only served to exacerbate America’s political divide, even after levels of political polarization had reached record highs during President Obama’s tenure (Pew 2017). College campuses were not immune to this division. At Emory University in Atlanta, protests broke out after the phrase “TRUMP 2016” was chalked all over campus sidewalks, after some students expressed that the chalkings made them feel unsafe (Svrluga 2016). At UC Berkeley, peaceful demonstrations turned violent during a visit by the former Breitbart editor, Milo Yiannopoulos, although the violence was determined to have been instigated by outside agitators (Green, Wong 2016). Protests against President Trump’s travel ban also occurred at Chapman, Ohio, Rutgers, and American Universities (Svrluga 2016).

On campus, students have seen free speech and support for marginalized groups pitted against each other in community debates. At schools like UC Berkeley, Claremont McKenna, UCLA, Yale, Harvard, Occidental, and the University of Chicago, students have published a slew of articles and op-eds in campus publications discussing this dichotomy (Steinmetz 2017; Hauslohner, Svrluga 2017; Martin, Nossel 2017). While some argue that the right to free expression trumps any desire to censor hateful or offensive speech, other students see the First Amendment being invoked to “protect slurs and other things that seem bent on undercutting a person’s presence as a student” (Martin, Nossel 2017). In 2018, a Gallup-Knight Foundation survey of three thousand college students found that a majority of students believed diversity and inclusivity should take precedence over free speech, although these views varied greatly by demographic. Whereas whites, men, and Republicans tended to prioritize the First Amendment, most students who identified as women, people of color, or Democrats favored support for diversity. Notably, a majority of students from every demographic surveyed said that hate speech
should not be protected under the Constitution, but the extent of the majority differed by school (Gallup, Knight Foundation 2017).

**Universities struggling to respond**

A number of positive developments resulted from the turmoil of the 2015 and 2016 campus protests. At the University of Missouri, the interim chancellor established a Division of Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity with the aims of promoting higher graduation rates for students of color, increasing diversity among faculty and staff, facilitating a more inclusive campus climate, and providing greater funding and support for academic research on diversity (Hartocollis 2017). At Yale, President Salovey announced the appointment of a deputy dean of diversity and presented plans to double the budget of the university’s cultural houses (Hamid, Yaffe-Bellany 2017). The school also changed the name of one of its residential colleges from Calhoun, named for the ardent proponent of slavery, to Grace Hopper, a groundbreaking computer pioneer and former naval officer. Other universities planned similar diversity initiatives to that of Yale and Mizzou, including Brown, NYU, Claremont McKenna, and Ithaca College (Kelly 2016).

In spite of these positive reforms, institutions of higher education have been challenged by this recent period of heightened unrest. As campuses have divided on lines of “free speech” and “support for marginalized groups,” students have demanded that university administrators and faculty take sides (Basinger 2016). Being committed to both the free exchange of ideas and the promotion of a diverse and welcoming campus community, universities have been forced to engage in a sort of balancing act: While some schools have made provisions for “safe space” and “trigger warning” policies in an effort to make the learning environment more comfortable for
students, other schools, such as the University of Chicago last summer, have declared their commitment to preserving academic freedom and exposing students to an array of conflicting and even offensive viewpoints (Basinger 2016).

Far more schools have fallen somewhere in between. At American University, Law Professor Jamie Raskin addressed the complexity of this issue in a talk entitled “Speaking Your Mind: The Politics of Disagreement on Campus” (American University 2016). To the more than 200 faculty members and students who showed up for the event, he posed the question, “How can the American university be a place of both boundless intellectual adventure and basic emotional security for everyone?” While Raskin argued in favor of preserving intellectual freedom and free speech on campus, students and faculty in the audience posed counter arguments, with some testifying to how “the presence of secure spaces on campus helped them deal with the anxiety brought on by difficult subject matter, both in the classroom and across campus” (American University 2016). American University eventually settled on a policy that has been implemented at other schools--student-led initiatives for safe spaces, but no formal changes to classroom structures (American University 2016).

While some universities have taken initial steps to address student responses to controversial material, including the establishment of diversity initiatives and changes to university policies, most schools continue to struggle to manage student responses to controversial issues in spite of reforms (Basinger 2016). Moreover, as the nation’s political climate grows more polarized, researchers predict that campus unrest will likely only continue--a study by the University of California at Los Angeles’ Higher Education Research Institute found that nearly 1 in 10 first-year college students said they planned to participate in a protest during
their undergraduate career, the highest percentage since the institute began administering this survey 50 years ago (Eagan et al. 2016).

These trends in campus unrest have prompted universities to look inward for answers—to subject their policies to greater scrutiny and reevaluate how well their institutions are serving the diverse student bodies they have pledged to educate (Basinger 2016). As Kevin Kruger, the president of NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, says, “The real hard work here is not predicting what might happen and which students might protest, but how do you create a culture on your campus that addresses some of these key issues we know are out there?” (Basinger 2016).

Implications for higher education

The ways in which recent unrest has played out on campuses across the nation is indicative of universities’ inadequate efforts to support students in grappling with controversial issues. As we saw over the course of the last few years, students have had a tendency to silence each other in community discussions, to deface property, to have strong emotional reactions to content they disagreed with (crying, shouting, and even spitting on other persons), and, in isolated incidents, to participate in violence during protests (Green, Wong 2016). While students’ behavior is technically their own responsibility, universities are capable of taking proactive measures to prevent such escalated reactions, ones that empower students to engage with controversial issues, actively disagree with one another, and stand for causes they believe in in a manner that is both respectful to others and promotes learning and development.

The fact that universities have struggled to manage student reactions to controversy indicates in part that they have not done enough to support students in engaging with these issues
in optimal constructive ways such as by exposing students to an array viewpoints in the classroom, asking students to engage critically with conflicting ideas on a regular basis, and practicing modes of civil discourse in class and campus-wide discussions. Of equal significance, it also indicates that while universities have made progress in promoting diversity and inclusivity on campus, there still remains much to be done in terms of facilitating multicultural and inclusive campus communities, supporting minority students’ transition to and journey through college, and training university faculty to manage controversial conversations with sensitivity toward minority student voices, using tactics that empower those voices to be heard.

These issues are of the utmost importance to higher education because students need to be able to engage with perspectives that differ from their own in order to experience learning and transformative development. I speak more to how this process occurs in my review below of developmental learning theories of college-aged students and minority students’ experience of higher education. In order to facilitate this development, universities must both model for students how to engage in civil discourse as well as take comprehensive actions to support minority students in their experience of college and the campus community. Actions universities might consider to achieve these missions follow in my recommendations section.

At this point in the essay, the reader might question whether and why universities have a responsibility to manage student reactions to controversy or to support students in the process of grappling with heated issues. I show in my review of the literature on developmental learning that the majority of college-aged students arrive on campus in a state of incomplete development, holding “dualistic” views of the world and lacking the tools or experience to engage with uncertainty, conflicting ideas, and controversial issues well (Perry, 1999). Universities are uniquely equipped and, I argue, have an educational obligations to support students in their
developmental journey—to facilitate progress through the sequential stages of developmental learning with the end-goal of creating “reflective thinkers”—because higher education is meant to instill students with critical thinking skills that “liberate” them from the confines of “black and white,” dualistic perspectives (King, Kitchener 1994).

That universities have a duty to ensure that they are supporting students in the developmental process is illustrated in most university mission statements (Schlueter 2016):

“The university seeks to foster in all of its students lifelong habits of careful observation, critical thinking, creativity, moral reflection and articulate expression.” —Fordham University

“The college provides students with the knowledge, critical-thinking skills and creative experience they need to navigate in a complex global environment.”

—University of Nevada, Reno: College of Liberal Arts

“The purpose of the university is to develop wise, thoughtful, critical thinkers and perceptive leaders by challenging young men and women to fulfill their potential through residence in a community that values intellectual rigor and respects the complexity of human understanding.”

—Colgate University

In these statements we find that most universities share a common goal: to develop in students the critical thinking, creativity, and leadership skills necessary for them to become “engaged citizens” capable of navigating a “complex global environment” (Schlueter 2016). Notably, critical thinking is mentioned in all three statements. According to the creators of the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a performance-based critical-thinking assessment of college students, students who possess strong critical thinking skills can “assess the quality and
relevance of evidence…analyze and synthesize data and information…and form a conclusion from their analysis” that is “rooted in data and information rather than speculation and opinion” (Hersh 2007). Thus, if colleges aim to develop higher order critical thinking skills in their students, they must necessarily expose them to a range of viewpoints, some of which students inevitably will not agree with.

If students are unable or unwilling to process opposing viewpoints, then this behavior directly conflicts with the mission to which universities aspire. Learning to think critically means that one must come into contact with anomaly, diversity, and conflicting ideas. In order to develop in students the capacity to critically discern between a set of viewpoints, universities must first expose them to different perspectives and engage with them through group conversation, individual reflection, and course assignments that require them to justify their thinking. It also requires that universities support the social emotional development of students, who in order to meaningfully engage in discussions of controversial issues must develop active listening perspective-taking skills, as well as empathy and emotional intelligence. Thus, in addition to promoting students’ critical thinking skills, universities must also guide students’ social and emotional growth as they are equally important to facilitating developmental learning.

Essential to university efforts to guide conversations of controversial issues is that the school must make concerted efforts to empower minority voices in discussion because marginalized students “are often familiar with their groups' voices being silenced in the classroom discourse or with having their personal and/or group experiences and beliefs discounted” (Valencia, Solorzano 1997). Research on minority students’ experiences of college demonstrates that these groups encounter challenges that their majority peers do not, in that minority students must navigate academic settings in which their backgrounds are not understood
and campus climates that are sometimes openly hostile and discriminatory (Watson et al. 2002; Quaye, Harper 2014). As I show in my review of the literature, these instances in which students experience discrimination or a sense of isolation can significantly impact their willingness and capacity to engage with the campus community, thereby undermining opportunities for transformative development (Valencia, Solorzano 1997). As a result, universities must make concerted efforts to empower the voices of the minority student population which remains more vulnerable to developmental stasis or regression as a function of the unique challenges they face on campus.

Crucially, minority students often experience a lack of sense of belonging on campus: many report feeling “invisible” in the classroom, or “drained” by the constant scrutiny their everyday actions receive in the context of stereotypical notions of their demographic (Solorzano & Villalpando 1998; Solorzano 2000). As a result, students from marginalized communities are more likely to seek out support from peers who share their backgrounds (Solorzano, Villapando 1998). While these relationships are deeply valuable to the mental and physical health of minority students, they are also indicative of a campus climate that does not promote fluid multicultural interactions, but rather one that incentivizes minority students to withdraw from the community. This dynamic runs counter to universities’ widespread commitments to diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusivity—if the campus climate is such that the diverse student bodies colleges attempt to cultivate are not interacting, then the university has failed its mission to promote multicultural exchange between students of different backgrounds. This, in turn, detracts from the university’s mission to develop all students’ critical thinking ability as it reduces opportunities for contact between students of different races, classes, religions, and
beliefs. It also prevents students from advancing in social and emotional maturity through repeated contact with challenging ideas and diverse peoples.

In order to develop higher order thinking skills, as well as to advance in emotional maturity, it is clear that students must grapple with diverse and conflicting ideas. But must students necessarily engage with controversial material to learn to think critically? To a certain extent, the answer is no. A political science professor teaching about theories of voter ignorance, for example, could expose students to a variety of articles that supported, negated, or offered different explanations for the claim that voters are uneducated or misinformed. Nothing about this lesson plan would be particularly controversial; meanwhile, students would still have the opportunity to consider a varied set of theories and discern between them.

But this would be a truncated form of critical thinking, one that is limited to the confines of the classroom. Life has far more controversy in store for students than what can be found in the academic discourse in most classrooms. In today’s polarized and often volatile world, especially, students must be prepared to engage with contradiction, nuance, and diversity of thought in order to be capable of navigating an increasingly complex and interconnected society. They must be capable of exercising emotionally intelligent strategies that will allow them to tolerate viewpoints that differ from their own, such as active listening, perspective-taking, and empathy. This preparation should begin at the university which is uniquely equipped to introduce students to diverse modes of thought and to support them as they grapple with challenging ideas.

**Theories of developmental learning**

One lens through which we can begin to understand how students respond to controversy and how conflict influences learning is through developmental theory and research. Developmental theorists study the way in which humans progress through sequential,
hierarchical stages of development as they age (Patton et al. 2016, Baxter Magolda, Torres 2008). A great deal of the developmental literature focuses on college students and their intellectual, social, and emotional growth over the course of their higher education (Baxter Magolda, Torres 2008). While these theories describe the general development of students over time, they can also offer insight into how conflict affects student development, why today’s students may struggle to engage with controversial issues, and how educators can support students as they confront controversy in the classroom and around campus. Essentially, developmental learning theory can offer both useful explanations for student responses to controversial issues, as well as the foundation for developing possible solutions to these problems.

Drawing on the works of Erikson, developmental psychologist William Perry grounded his model of “cognitive and affective growth during the college years” in the idea that students experience development through “shocks” (Perry 1999). In following a cohort of Harvard and Radcliffe students across their undergraduate years, Perry noticed that students tended to struggle in coming to grips with the diverse and conflicting ideas they encountered in their classes. For example, many students realized for the first time that “reasonable people can disagree—even about their most cherished "truths" concerning good and evil, God, nature, and human nature” (Perry 1999). As students grappled with this idea, they progressed through a series of sequential stages in which their perspective on learning changed.

In Perry’s model, students start with the perspective that college is the place where the “right answers” are stored, and that the purpose of higher education is to help them absorb and retain these answers. Eventually, students begin to realize that there exists a great diversity of opinions, and that many of these opinions are in conflict with each other. Moreover, the
arguments of the “experts” are fallible and often in conflict with one another. Students at this stage tend to attribute this conflict to confusion and poor training among the experts. Over time, students begin to accept the ambiguity in answers as legitimate, though they are more likely to do so in fields that do not yet have all the “right answers,” such as the social sciences and humanities (Perry 1999).

Some students eventually find that conflict, diversity, and uncertainty are present in all fields, but hold fast to the idea that certain fields are bound to produce right answers whereas others exist in the realm of opinion. Finally, a few students will realize that multiple perspectives exist in all fields and that knowledge is constantly evolving—even in the hard sciences. As they mature, these students will begin to view truth as tentative and subject to change as new evidence presents itself. They come to understand their higher education not as a period of memorizing the right answers and absorbing information, but as an opportunity to learn the important questions and major concepts of a field (Perry 1999).

Perry’s research on the developmental trajectory of college students throughout their undergraduate careers may shed light on the ways that students have reacted to controversial material in the past few years. If students arrive on campus with the rather dualistic, black-and-white worldviews that Perry describes, then the task of regularly engaging with perspectives that conflict with their own--in both their academic work and their interactions with their campus communities--is bound to be challenging, both intellectually and emotionally. Perry’s work demonstrates that while students are able to accommodate this challenge over time, the process of developmental transformation is gradual and students require continuous input and support from the university in order to reach developmental maturity.
Perry’s model set the stage for decades of future research on developmental growth in college-aged students. Subsequent theories would expand upon his work, relating developmental theory to topics such as tolerance and diversity education. One such theory, developed by King and Kitchener in the 1970s, is that of “Reflective Judgment” (King, Kitchener 1994). This model is based on Dewey’s observation that people engage in “reflective thinking” when faced with problems that cannot be solved with certainty (Dewey 1910). Similar to Perry’s work, the Reflective Judgment model is characterized by a series of stages that correspond with students’ views of knowledge and how it is acquired. These stages are divided into three categories: pre-reflective reasoning, quasi-reflective reasoning, and reflective reasoning.

The pre-reflective reasoning category consists of students who believe that “knowledge is gained through the word of an authority figure or through firsthand observation, rather than, for example, through the evaluation of evidence” (King, Kitchener 1994). These students tend to view all problems as well-structured and hold their beliefs with certainty. As a result, King and Kitchener claim that pre-reflective thinkers are more likely to make judgments that are based on stereotypes. Quasi-reflective thinkers recognize that not all problems are well-structured, but remain unsure of how to deal with the uncertainty of these problems. While students in this category are less likely to make judgments based on stereotypes, they are also prone to relying on “gut feelings” to arrive at conclusions. King and Kitchener observe that this is because they lack the skills to effectively evaluate evidence. Calling to mind Perry’s framework, students in the reflective reasoning category accept that knowledge is constantly evolving and that their understanding of the world must be “actively constructed.” Moreover, these students are capable of critically evaluating information and use evidence to support their claims (King, Kitchener 1994).
King and Kitchener hypothesize that students’ capacity for tolerance is related to their reflective judgment skills. In particular, they found that students’ ability to critically evaluate evidence acted as a mechanism to inhibit the formation of stereotypes. Students who scored the mean on King and Kitchener’s scale of tolerance were at or above the quasi-reflective level of the RJ model. In other words, students who progressed to more advanced degrees of reflective thinking were more likely to demonstrate tolerant attitudes towards diversity (King, Kitchener 1994).

Importantly, King and Kitchener found that the transition from pre-reflective to quasi-reflective reasoning tends to occur in the college years. At this time, students abandon “ignorant certainty” for “intelligent confusion.” King and Kitchener’s findings imply that higher education can have a significant impact on students’ capacity for reflective thinking and, as a consequence, their ability to tolerate diverse peoples and points of view. In light of these conclusions, universities should be making intentional efforts to foster students’ critical reasoning skills by consistently placing them in situations where they must grapple with uncertainty (King, Kitchener 1994).

While critical reasoning ability is important to grappling with uncertainty, a main reason for why uncertainty is so hard to deal with is because it requires a great deal of emotional energy and endurance to abandon “ignorant certainty” for “intelligent confusion”—to desert one’s own prior sense of security in ill-formed beliefs for a new perspective that acknowledges that truth is relative. This is especially difficult in discussions of controversial issues as these conversations evoke far more emotional reactions than do simply intellectual debates. To engage with beliefs that challenge one’s own requires students to exercise active listening, perspective-taking, and
empathy skills that they may not have. This can be overwhelming to students, especially those who are emotionally unequipped to handle these circumstances.

Salovey’s theory of emotional intelligence can shed light on the developmental journey students must take to increase their emotional capacity to engage with controversy (Salovey, Mayer 1990). “Emotional intelligence” is a marker of an individual’s ability to engage in sophisticated information processing about emotions and to use this information to inform their behavior. Students who progress to more advanced levels of emotional intelligence are capable of remaining open to both positive and negative feelings, reflectively engaging or detaching from an emotion depending on its usefulness, and understanding and managing emotions in oneself and others (Salovey, Mayer 1990). These skills, though challenging to develop, are invaluable in the context of engaging with controversial issues that elicit emotional responses. The greater a student’s level of emotional intelligence, the greater their capacity to regulate the emotions that would otherwise cause them to react explosively to controversial material or perspectives they disagree with. Instead, students can utilize their abilities to engage in sophisticated information processing about their own and others’ emotions to engage in active listening and perspective-taking behaviors, which can serve to enhance empathy and help students more productively engage with controversy and uncertainty.

However, forcing students to engage with too much uncertainty can be counterproductive. Embedded in this idea is Sanford’s theory of “challenge and support,” which claims that for college students to progress in development, the “challenges they experience must be met with supports that can sufficiently tolerate the stress of the challenge itself” (Sanford 1962; 1966). Sanford argues that students must possess a sense of “readiness,” or level of emotional maturity and preparation, to be capable of responding well to challenges, or situations
in which students presently lack the knowledge, skills, or emotional ability to cope. Too much or too little challenge could result in stasis or regression. Thus, Sanford reasons that students must be met with supports that will aid them in successfully overcoming periods of crisis (Sanford 1962; 1966).

Sanford’s theory suggests that universities should design their curriculum, instruction, and assignments to provide students with enough challenge to encourage their developmental progression, but also to offer them enough support to render them capable of rising to the challenge. It also offers a lens through which we can better understand campus unrest in the past few years in which we saw students have intense emotional reactions to campus issues. In some cases, students resorted to shouting down their peers, silencing those who disagreed with them, and even resorting to violent and lewd behavior as a means of expressing their reactions to the controversial issues they were grappling with.

Salovey would likely classify these students as lacking the emotional regulation skills to “reflectively engage or detach from an emotion depending on its utility,” or in other words, to overcome their emotional reaction in order to effectively engage with the material at hand (Salovey, Mayer 1990). Simultaneously, Sanford might interpret these reactions as emblematic of scenarios in which students received too much challenge in terms of the gravity of the issues they were facing—including issues of racism, inequality, and discrimination—and not enough support in terms of the guidance and emotional modeling they were receiving from the university.

As Perry and King and Kitchener demonstrated, institutions of higher education are capable of facilitating students’ developmental learning by purposely having them engage with uncertainty and conflict. But in order to prevent students from experiencing developmental stasis
or regression, Salovey and Sanford show that universities must also support them in this process by offering supports that bolster students’ social, emotional, and intellectual development. Examples of such supports include modeling civil modes of discourse in the classroom, creating spaces for the discussion of community issues on campus, strengthening advising systems to increase emotional support from faculty, and reassessing university policies to ensure that they are inclusive of minority groups, among other strategies. I speak more to the options that universities have to challenge and support student development in the recommendations section below.

Building on Sanford’s theory, professor of psychology and education Lee Knefelcamp argues that many diversity education courses at the college-level fail to take into account students’ readiness to discuss controversial topics (Knefelcamp, David-Lang 2000). Students enter college with different levels of experience engaging with issues of diversity, such race, class, gender, and religion. They also come to the table with widely varying degrees of experience with discrimination, inequality, and oppression, issues that lie at the heart of diversity education courses. Knefelcamp finds that often students’ level of social-emotional, psychological, or intellectual preparedness to handle controversial material does not correspond with the demands of these courses (Knefelcamp, David-Lang 2000). To use the language of Sanford, the level of “challenge” in these cases is disproportionate to the level of “support.” When this situation occurs, students can become easily overwhelmed by the material and shut down. Often, this experience is accompanied by a feeling of anger at the “other” and a hardening of the students’ former views (Knefelcamp, David-Lang 2000).

This type of emotional paralysis, which Sanford might classify as developmental stasis or regression, is indicative of a student who lacks the social and emotional readiness to engage with
controversial issues at the present level of challenge. In order to help students avoid developmental setbacks, universities should devote concerted efforts to developing students’ emotional intelligence skills as a part of their higher education. This is because without these skills, students will continue to struggle with adverse emotional reactions to controversial issues or ideas that conflict with their own, thereby resulting in developmental impediments.

Knefelcamp’s research demonstrates how important it is for universities to match challenging material with the appropriate level of intellectual and emotional support. In facilitating discussions on controversial issues, college educators should be mindful of the fact that students enter the classroom with varying degrees of experience engaging with issues of diversity. She notes that while some students may be comfortable grappling with conflicting opinions and uncertainty, others may currently lack the critical reasoning skills or emotional preparedness to deal with controversial discussions at the same level (Knefelcamp, David-Lang 2000). Knefelcamp’s research implies that college instructors should scaffold their curriculum so that students’ intellectual and psychological capacity to tolerate controversy can keep pace with the demand to engage with it.

Theories of and research in developmental learning serve as both a lens through which we can understand recent campus unrest and student responses to controversy, as well as a foundation for developing solutions to these issues. From this research we can derive a number of significant observations: 1) development occurs in sequential stages—students start at different places and progress through the stages at different rates. 2) Significant learning happens during periods of “shock,” or “periods in which an individual must make significant decisions between different courses of action” ((Perry 1999). 3) Over the course of their undergraduate experience, students tend to progress from a state of “ignorant certainty” to “intelligent
confusion” (King, Kitchener 1994). 4) This progression is accompanied by greater ability to evaluate claims and utilize evidence to support arguments both intellectually and emotionally, which in turn is accompanied by greater capacity for tolerance of diverse peoples and points of view. This development tends to occur in college years, meaning higher education can significantly impact students’ intellectual and emotional capacity to grapple with the uncertainty of conflicting ideas, evaluate claims based upon the evidence, and as a result, make decisions that are grounded in reason rather than in “gut feelings” or stereotypes.

However, developmental theorists make it clear that a college education does not guarantee reaching the highest stage of development. Universities cannot simply assume that because research indicates that transformative development tends to occur during the college years, it always does. This development is dependent on the university’s ability to transmit critical thinking and emotional intelligence skills to students—to teach them how to critically evaluate conflicting ideas and process their own emotional response to the material (Baxter Magolda, Torres 2008). In order to do this, universities must necessarily expose students to conflicting ideas, uncertainty, and controversy, and to encourage them to engage with these challenges. Otherwise, students will be left to navigate this period of development without support, which may result in the kind of explosive reactions to controversial issues that campuses have witnessed in the past few years.

But in order for students to engage with these challenges well, the university must also provide a level of emotional support that is equal to the challenge. Therefore, universities can only facilitate transformative development in students if they 1) challenge students to engage with conflicting and even controversial ideas and 2) support students in meeting these challenges both intellectually and affectively. Inherent in this claim is that universities must have a
comprehensive understanding of theories of developmental learning in college students, as well as the ability to put this knowledge into practice by altering curriculum and pedagogy, university institutions, programs, and campus culture. I speak more to this in my recommendations section below.

**Minority student experiences of college**

While theories of developmental learning shed light on student responses to controversy, they do not necessarily take into account the ways in which students’ identities influence these responses and their experience of higher education as a whole. Universities cannot facilitate developmental and transformative learning without taking into account the ways in which students’ backgrounds affect their educational experience. I include a particular focus on minority students in this essay because these students experience challenges on campus that leave them vulnerable to developmental stasis or regression. Therefore, it is essential that universities work to empower minority student voices in order to 1) help them overcome the unique challenges they face to promote their development at a rate equal to that of their majority peers, and 2) increase whole campus contact with a diverse spectrum of ideas, which are derived from multicultural exchanges between students of different backgrounds. The ultimate goal of these aims, which are centered on promoting student development, is to increase students’ capacity to tolerate viewpoints that differ from their own, thereby augmenting their ability to engage in discussions of controversial issues in a productive manner.

A significant body of research on minority experiences of college has demonstrated that students from marginalized communities experience college in an entirely different way than do majority students (Watson et al. 2002). From a developmental standpoint, minority and
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underrepresented students face different social, emotional, and academic challenges than do their peers, and thus require supports from the university that address their unique needs. These challenges include an array of negative and identity-based interactions with peers and faculty, both in the classroom and in social circles around campus (Watson et al. 2002; Quaye, Harper 2014). According to Valencia and Solorzano (1997), marginalized students are often familiar with their group’s voices being silenced in classroom discussion or with having their beliefs and experiences discounted by the majority. Many describe feeling “invisible” or “ignored” within the classroom setting, while others have shared that their experiences as racial minorities were “omitted, distorted, and stereotyped” in the course curriculum (Solorzano & Villalpando 1998). Moreover, Solorzano (2000) found that students often felt “personally diminished by both verbal and nonverbal microaggressions” committed by their White majority peers, leaving them feeling “drained” or “on the defensive” from the intense scrutiny they received in their everyday interactions with students on campus. Still other minority students agreed that faculty members would draw assumptions about their abilities and carry lower expectations for them (Solorzano 2000).

Universities are responsible for supporting minority students in the unique challenges they face if they aim to fulfill their mission statements, which express a commitment to both enhancing students’ critical thinking ability and emotional growth and maintaining a diverse campus community in which students can comfortably engage in fluid multicultural exchanges. Indeed, the former commitment cannot be realized without the latter—students’ critical thinking, emotional maturity, and developmental transformation are catalyzed by their contact with diverse and conflicting ideas, opinions, and experiences, which in turn must be gained through contact with a diverse community.
Across numerous studies, researchers have demonstrated the positive effects of a multicultural campus on student learning. For example, researchers have demonstrated that when students are exposed to novel ideas, peers who are different than themselves, and the challenges that such exposures bring, students benefit from improved cognitive skills, including stronger critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Antonio et al. 2004). Moreover, studies have shown that college students who experience positive interactions with peers of different racial backgrounds are more “open-minded and have more engaging classroom conversations” in which “improved learning actually occurs because abstract concepts are tied directly to concrete examples drawn from a range of experiences” (Deo 2011). White students in particular benefit from racially diverse classroom settings—researchers have found that majority students demonstrated higher levels of complex thinking in the presence of minority peers (Antonio et al. 2004; Sommers et al. 2008; Pitt, Packard 2012). Overall research has shown that “the mere inclusion of different perspectives, and especially divergent ones, in any course of discussion leads to the kind of learning outcomes—for example, critical thinking, perspective-taking—that educators, regardless of field, are interested in” (Pitt, Packard 2012).

In addition to the benefits that diversity offers majority students and the campus as a whole, increased diversity levels also positively impact minority students’ academic performance. This is mainly due to the decreased risk of stereotyping and discrimination that minority students enjoy in more diverse college campuses, which in turn prevents them from experiencing the negative impacts that isolation and negative stereotyping have on minorities’ health and academic performance (Wells et al. 2016). These negative experiences become less common on diverse campuses in which students of color are not tokens, given that universities have facilitated the inclusion of minority students well within the campus community, thereby
leading to more positive academic outcomes and experiences for minority groups (Wells et al. 2016).

In addition to the robust social science literature that demonstrates the positive effects of diversity on academic outcomes, there exists a significant body of research proving a relationship between diverse campus communities and improved social-emotional skills in students (Pettigrew, Tropp 2006; Davies et al. 2011; Wells et al. 2016). In particular, these skills included an enhanced capacity of students to exhibit cross-cultural and interracial understanding, empathy, and an ability to live with people whose backgrounds differ from their own (Wells et al. 2016). According to the amicus brief filed by Brown and other elite universities, such as Yale and Princeton, this is because “diversity encourages students to question their assumptions, to understand that wisdom may be found in unexpected voices, and to gain an appreciation of the complexity of today’s world” (Brief of Brown University et al. in Support of Respondents in Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin,” 2015). Other research demonstrates how racially diverse settings help to reduce racial prejudice by promoting contact between races, in the form of both formal academic relationships and informal friendships across group lines (Pettigrew, Tropp 2006; 2008; Davies et al. 2011).

Notably, very little research has addressed the impact of minority identity on students’ participation in classroom discussion. Of the research that has been done, most relies on personal experience and reflection rather than systematic research. For example, Saufely, Cowan, and Blake (1983) posed a theoretical argument that minority students at predominantly white institutions manifest a fear of failure that may prevent them from participating in group discussions as frequently as their white classmates. Moreover, Hardiman and Jackson (1992) contended that instructors’ failure to understand and respect students’ racial identity could lead
to heated and volatile situations in the classroom. Weinstein and Obear (1992) elaborated on this idea, arguing that majority group students could “trigger” adverse emotional reactions from minority students that “could easily silence a classroom discussion altogether” and runs counter to the value of dialogue. While these observations are not based in empirical research, it is not hard to imagine that minority students would feel uncomfortable participating in conversations with people who did not understand their backgrounds, especially if these conversations surrounded issues of identity and caused them to feel obligated to “be the spokesperson” for their own group.

The negative experiences minority students navigate throughout college as a result of their identity can have a number of consequences for their health and development. For example, among the most significant inequalities between racial minorities and their majority peers are the poorer health outcomes experienced by African Americans and Latin Americans, which occur regardless of socioeconomic status (Walton, Cohen 2011). Moreover, minority students often struggle with feelings of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation amidst a campus community that feels foreign, and at times entirely hostile, to them (Solorzano, Villapando 1998). This means that in addition to maintaining good academic standing, students of marginalized communities must also navigate “a myriad of pejorative racial stereotypes that fuel the perpetuation of racial microaggressions” that their majority peers have no understanding of on a daily basis (Solorzano, Villapando 1998).

Another common experience that minority students face in college is a feeling of a lack of social belonging. This feeling, defined as “a sense of having positive relationships with others,” is a fundamental human need that impacts students immune function, mental health, intellectual achievement, and personal development (Walton, Cohen 2011). Even an isolated
instance in which a student experiences social exclusion can impact their well-being, IQ test performance, and overall measure of self-control (Walton, Cohen 2011). When students feel uncertain about their belonging in the campus community, especially when this feeling is chronic, it can undermine minorities’ performance and development, as evidenced by the higher incidence of physical and mental health issues and lower graduation rates experienced by this population (Mendoza-Denton et al. 2002). Sanford might classify this as a case in which the level of “challenge” is disproportionate to the level of support—in other words, the numerous social-emotional and academic trials that minority students face in college as a function of their identity are greater than the amount of support they receive to overcome them. As a result, minority students are an especially vulnerable population that is at higher risk for developmental stasis or regression in their college years.

If universities fail to provide this population the unique supports they require, many of these students will then seek out their own support from peers who share their backgrounds. The resulting academic and social “counterspaces” that minority students create serve as “sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (Solorzano et al. 2000). As Solorzano and Villapando (1998) found, academic counter spaces that African American students created allowed them to foster a learning environment in which their lived experiences of identity were validated and viewed as important knowledge. It also allowed these students to vent to others who shared in their challenges, and to seek out both emotional and academic support from their peers. In a developmental sense, these spaces could be seen as students’ attempts to create their own supports to match the challenges they are being presented with in their higher education. The spaces that minority students create to support themselves through the unique challenges they
face on campus are deeply important to their overall well-being and development, as they allow them to draw the social, emotional, and academic support they need to weather the unique challenges they face on campus from peers with whom they feel a shared sense of identity.

However, a prevalence of these spaces is also indicative of a campus climate in which multicultural interactions are compromised and students are incentivized to self-segregate into groups of peers who share their backgrounds. This dynamic runs counter to university missions of fostering critical thinking, which is based in the exchange of information, experiences, and ideas between peoples of different backgrounds and identities. Thus, this dynamic simultaneously negates universities’ commitment to promoting a diverse and multicultural campus community. A lack of opportunities for students to interact with peers of different backgrounds means fewer chances for students to grapple conflicting ideas and diverse worldviews, or to learn from the experiences of their peers’ whose backgrounds differ from their own. This, in turn, results in less opportunity for students to experience transformative development, which can only occur as a result of meaningful exposure to anomalous ideas and challenging conversations.

But in order for these challenging conversations to occur, universities must necessarily provide appropriate supports. Because minority student experiences of college differ widely from that of the majority, the supports universities offer minority groups must also be different, in that they must specifically address the needs of students from these communities. Some of these more significant needs of minority students include a feeling of belonging within campus as a social space, a sense of support from and connection to students of similar backgrounds, and a curriculum and pedagogy that is sensitive to the ways in which identity impacts student experiences of college. As suggested by Carroll (1998); Guinier, Fine, and Balin (1997); Hurtado
(1992); and Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1999), examples of such supports that would specifically benefit the development of students from marginalized groups could range from 1) policies that encourage the inclusion of students, faculty, and administrators of color, 2) a curriculum that incorporates the historical and lived experiences of minority groups, 3) programs that support the recruitment, retention, and eventual graduation of first-generation, low-income, and students of color, and 4) a university mission that explicitly reinforces the institution’s commitment to pluralism and diversity. I will speak more to these suggestions and their implementation in my recommendations section.

**Analysis and recommendations**

In recent years, universities have struggled to handle student responses to controversial issues, which have ballooned into widespread incidences of campus unrest across the nation. Responding to student rejection of controversial speakers, names, statues, and ideas, campus publications and the national media have documented an increasing tendency in students to silence those they disagree with rather than engage them in fruitful dialogue. These issues are of the utmost importance to higher education because students need to be able to engage with perspectives that differ from their own in order to experience developmental learning. To facilitate this development, universities must both model to students how to engage in emotionally intelligent and intellectually critical civil discourse, as well as take comprehensive actions to support minority students in their experience of college and the campus community. This is because 1) students cannot engage with diverse ideas if they are not exposed to a diverse community, and 2) students will continue to struggle to respond well to the diverse ideas they encounter as long as they lack the social, emotional, and intellectual tools to critically process
them, and to manage the uncertainty that accompanies an acknowledgement of multiple worldviews as valid.

This is especially true for minority students, who—due to the sense of isolation, lack of belonging, and incidences of discrimination they face on campus—are especially vulnerable to developmental stasis or regression in ways that majority students are not. Consequently, universities must necessarily offer minority students supports that match their unique set of needs in order to bolster their development, so that they can progress at a rate equal to that of their majority peers.

Institutions of higher education should also make concerted efforts to support minority students if they mean to uphold their commitment to promoting the free exchange of ideas within a diverse campus community. This is because minority student voices must be represented in discussions of controversial issues for students to be exposed to the full spectrum of viewpoints—to be challenged by perspectives that differ from or even conflict with their own and to experience transformative development as a result. But when these students are not empowered to participate, this hinders both their own developmental journey and that of their peers by limiting opportunities for these students to participate in the free exchange of ideas within the campus community. If universities are committed to supporting the transformative development of all students on campus, thereby augmenting students’ capacity to engage well with controversial issues, they must necessarily devote a special focus to supporting underrepresented students through the unique challenges they face in college.

Supporting students as they engage with controversial issues requires a number of preconditions: 1) that they have actual contact with ideas and worldviews that differ from their own, which can only be gained through fluid interactions within a diverse campus community,
and 2) that students have the social, emotional, and intellectual skills to engage with them in the first place, which can only be gained through an even mixture of challenge and support provided by the university. Here I provide a number of recommendations, both proactive and reactive in nature, for universities to follow in order to support student development and engagement with controversial issues.

Proactive measures:

- General supports for the student body at large
  - Promote critical thinking and evaluation skills—while this recommendation may seem obvious, many students in modern-day universities are not required to employ critical thinking or complex reasoning skills often in order to earn a college degree (Arum 2011). Universities should aim to continually expose students to a diversity of viewpoints, engage them in critical conversation, and require them to synthesize what they have learned in assignments that test the depth of their understanding. If done frequently enough, students will find that the critical thinking process becomes second nature, resulting in the “liberation” of the mind that liberal arts education aims to induce. This is because students are then capable of deconstructing any set of arguments, evaluating them based upon the evidence, and devising their own “truth” that is relative rather than “black and white.” King and Kitchener might classify this as a journey to “reflective thinking” (King, Kitchener 1994).
  - Model to students ways to engage in civil discourse—college educators can support students in engaging in discussions of controversial issues by teaching
them perspective-taking, active listening, and empathy skills that encourage respectful disagreement and the exchange of ideas. Essential to this strategy is that students present their ideas and opinions to others using evidence to support their claims, and demonstrating respect for personhood.

- Incorporate social-emotional development into the university mission statement, so that the message is that higher education targets the whole person and is holistic in its prescription.
- Provide emotional support to students--this recommendation could come in the form of open classroom discussions of strategies to develop emotional intelligence skills, advising and mentoring programs in which faculty serve to increase support and modeling, and increased access to mental health services on campus.
- Spread university understanding of developmental learning theory and research--the final and most important recommendation is to increase university awareness and understanding of theories of developmental learning in college students, which serve to both shed light on the ways in which students respond to challenge and controversy, as well as to offer solutions to universities in how to best support students in the challenges they face.

Taking these proactive measures that support students’ academic, social, and emotional development could help to mitigate adverse student reactions to controversy and volatile periods of student unrest. And when protests inevitably do occur, students will be prepared to truly engage with a diversity of perspectives and learn from each other, rather than shame or shout one
another into silence. Overall, these general recommendations have the potential to further student development and learning, thereby leading to higher levels of tolerance within the student population (King, Kitchener 1994). They also reflect and actualize universities’ missions—to prepare students for a diverse and increasingly globalized world in which they will be constantly asked to engage in discussions of controversial issues in a way that allows them to learn from others’ experiences, as well as to generate solutions that are based in compromise.

- Specific supports for minority students
  - Establish programs that specifically address minority student needs--examples of such programs include the First Year Scholars program at Yale, which supports first generation and low-income students in getting the academic preparation needed to succeed in college, familiarizing themselves with the resources on campus, and talking with other FGLI students about shared struggles related to identity (Yale University, 2017). Programs like FSY give minority students an automatic space in which they can convene with students of similar backgrounds and draw support from students and faculty members who understand their unique challenges.
  - Communicate with minority groups--universities should be in touch with minority student experience on campus, by talking with them directly in the context of focus groups, program reflections, casual meals with administrators, etc.
  - Create clear pathways to report incidences of discrimination--the AACU recommends that institutions establish easy-to-access systems for students to report instances of discrimination on campus (Basinger 2016). These systems
should also include mechanisms by which students can share what they have experienced with trusted professionals and seek support if they so choose.

- Train instructors in cultural sensitivity--college educators should be trained to recognize the ways in which identity colors students’ experiences of college, to understand how it may affect the ways in which minority students participate in class, to adapt pedagogy and curriculum to take into account historical and modern perspectives of minority groups, and to be aware of issues minority students experience—such as low expectations from instructors, stereotyping, being chosen to serve as the “spokespeople” for their demographic, and having their voices dismissed or silenced by majority students in class (Solorzano et al. 2000). Instructors need to be aware of these issues so they can accommodate them and be aware of the ways in which they can improve the learning experiences and development of minority students.

- Train instructors in facilitating discussions of controversial issues—this recommendation is by far the most straightforward. University centers for teaching and learning have amassed a plethora using plethora of strategies to guide students through conversations of sensitive topics, many of which acknowledge how background and identity affect student experiences of these conversations (Vanderbilt CFT, 2018; University of Michigan CRLT, 2018; Yale University CTL, 2018). By familiarizing college educators with these strategies, universities could promote more productive discussions of controversial issues within the classroom.
The aforementioned recommendations are essentially preventative in nature, in that they served as proactive measures for universities to prevent volatile scenarios of campus unrest. These strategies, which would serve to support students' academic, social, and emotional development and to ease minority student experience of college, could better equip students to engage with controversial material in a productive way that encourages dialogue and exchange, rather than shaming or silencing.

That said, these strategies are not offered with the expectation that they will prevent campus unrest or adverse reactions to controversial issues from occurring altogether. College campuses are historically hotbeds for activism and, especially in today’s political climate, students are likely to engage in protests over the course of their undergraduate years (Valocchi 2010; Eagan et al. 2016; Thomas, Gismondi 2017). In case universities have not taken proactive measures to address student reactions to controversy, or when unrest occurs anyway, here are some recommendations for reactive measures universities can implement:

Reactive measures:

- React quickly and interact with students directly—in light of recent advancements in modern technology and the speed of social media, the AACU advises universities to respond to student unrest at a rapid pace, utilizing town halls and community discussions at which administrators are present to address student concerns (Basinger 2016).

- Be prepared— in order to facilitate a quick reaction to campus unrest, universities must “ensure their institution has an internal communications strategy that is thought out long before any potential protest… which should include simulations and training around de-escalating crisis situations” (NASPA 2017).
• Redouble efforts toward diversity initiatives—as a reactive measure to address campus unrest, many universities have opted to recruit more faculty/students of color, increase funding for cultural programming, reform financial aid policies, and establish preparation programs for minority students to help ease them into their college experience.

• Create spaces for community discussion—campuses should also create intercultural opportunities for conversations among students of diverse backgrounds and identities. Moreover, Kevin Kruger, the president of the NASPA, recommends that college leaders should acknowledge “that at every institution, students are going to experience bias or something that offends them” (NASPA 2017). The point of community discussions would be to engage in authentic dialogue over these issues, with students articulating clearly and respectfully the ways in which they were offended and why, and then remaining open to response.

While reactive strategies are useful for addressing campus reactions to controversial issues in the moment, a better approach would be for universities to implement primarily proactive strategies that enhance student development and empower students to engage with controversy in ways that contribute to learning. Reactive strategies could then be used to address campus unrest as it occurs, but with the added benefit of proactive policies having been in place for some time and having already created a system of campus norms in which students expect to engage in respectful, mutual dialogue.

In the following section, I address a number of case studies of universities that have experienced recent incidents of unrest and how they have dealt with these situations. In addition to identifying the strengths of their approaches, I also show how most universities’ methods for
managing student responses to controversy are not based in an understanding of the developmental theory literature. As a result, the strategies these institutions have implemented to manage campus unrest have been predominantly reactive—that is, they only serve to treat the symptoms of the problem, rather than the root cause, and thus fail to truly help students engage with controversial issues and grow developmentally.

Case studies

University of Missouri

The University of Missouri has struggled with a series of incidents of racism and bigotry since 2010 (Pearson 2015). These have included a hate crime perpetrated against the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center and multiple isolated incidents of racial slurs that minority students reported experiencing on campus. Some students, including the student body president Payton Head, have also described a generalized climate of racial tensions on campus (Hartocollis 2017).

In September of 2015, on the heels of the shooting of Michael Brown and the Ferguson Protests of the previous year, University of Missouri students organized an event on campus called “Racism Lives Here” in which students claimed that the administration had done nothing to address the series of racist incidents that had occurred. A month later, a white student used a racial slur to describe a group of black peers at a university event. Students organized a group called “Concerned Student 1950,” with the date referring to the first year black students were admitted to the university, in response to the incident. The same month, a swastika composed of fecal matter was found smeared upon a bathroom wall, and a hate crime incident report was filed by the university’s Department of Residential Life (Pearson 2015).
November of 2015 saw the beginning of campus protests, which started with a hunger strike led by a student who vowed not to eat until the university president resigned. Other members of “Concerned Student 1950” later staged protests on the university’s recruiting day, leading mock tours of campus in which they recited the incidents of racism that had occurred since 2010. Dealing the most significant blow to the university, the football team’s black players announced that they would not practice or play until the president resigned, which would result in a million dollar fine to the university for forfeiting a game against BYU (Pearson 2015).

While the president originally intended to remain in his post, he (and later the university chancellor) resigned in early November. The campus continued to suffer aftershocks of unrest—classes were cancelled due to threats of a KKK presence on campus and various confrontations occurred between students and journalists (Pearson 2015). The protests at the University of Missouri inspired a number of related movements at other campuses, including Ithaca College, Yale, Claremont McKenna, Amherst, and Brandeis. They also likely caused a drop in freshman enrollment rates in the following year—the university saw a 42% decline in matriculation rates among black students and a 21% decrease among whites (Hartocollis 2017).

Since 2015, the university and its board of curators have since taken steps to address student concerns. These have included hiring the system’s first ever Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer, as well as creating a council on race relations that has drawn up recommendations for the university going forward. Administrators have also hosted meetings with student leaders over lunch to discuss the state of race relations on campus. Interim President Middleton encourages other universities experiencing similar issues to respond quickly to student unrest, and to “be unafraid to walk out of our offices and talk to students” who “just want to be heard” (Basinger 2016).
But while the University of Missouri is taking important steps to improve the campus’s racial climate, the institution has been widely criticized for its slow response to student concerns ranging as far back as 2010 (Hartocollis 2017). The university’s reaction to campus unrest has been largely if not entirely reactive in nature, and more importantly the reactive measures the university has taken only somewhat fulfill the necessary conditions to promote developmental learning in students. Perhaps the most useful strategies for facilitating development were the university’s recruitment of minority faculty and conversations with student leaders—while the first measure serves to increase support to minority students on campus, thereby bolstering their development, the second provides student the opportunity to engage in dialogue over controversial issues, presumably in a setting in which norms of civil discourse are enforced.

With that said, it does not seem that the current set of reforms will promote meaningful student growth and development. The University of Missouri system makes no mention of developmental learning on its website, aside from a blurb on child development through the school’s early childhood education center (University of Missouri, 2018). Thus, it is unlikely that the measures the university has taken were made with the goals of transformative development in mind, and that the university’s measures will miss the mark of fostering development learning on campus. Without a comprehensive set of policies that target both student unrest in real time as well as student development over the course of college, the University of Missouri may continue to struggle with managing student responses to controversy.

Claremont McKenna

Like the University of Missouri, Claremont McKenna college also experienced a wave of unrest in reaction to campus race relations in the fall of 2015 (Glick 2015). It began with an
article written by a FGLI Mexican-American student who expressed deep feelings of social isolation and lack of belonging on campus. Upon reading the article, Dean Mary Spellman sent an email to the student telling her that the administration would work harder to support students “who don’t fit our CMC mold” (Glick 2015).

Students caught wind of the email and took offense to Spellman’s phrasing, later expressing concerns that the administrator had “not done enough to create a safe space on campus for students from marginalized backgrounds” (Watanabe 2015). The campus was then rocked by protests spanning the course of a few weeks—within that time, multiple students engaged in hunger strikes to demand Dean Spellman’s resignation. They received it by mid-November (Glick 2015).

Students who were present on campus at the time describe the extent to which the protests affected the community and hampered communications within the student body. In an open letter signed by over 300 students, Nathaniel Tsai (Claremont McKenna ’17) wrote, “Never have we been more divided…never did we think the day would come where we were scared to speak our minds, where fear of our fellow students' rage silenced us” (Watanabe 2015). Still other students observed that the protests, which began with the intention of “bringing out real, painful concerns about our college…quickly morphed into a torrent of seemingly uncontrollable anger that left casualties in its wake” (Watanabe 2015). Meanwhile, hundreds of minority students submitted statements about their repeated experiences with discrimination on campus, requesting that the university take steps to address racial bias and provide support resources on campus.

Claremont McKenna took a number of steps to respond to student concerns in real time. These included the creation of new leadership positions on diversity and inclusion within the
offices of academic and student affairs, as well as redoubled efforts to hire faculty members of minority backgrounds. The school also committed to “increasing diversity within the curriculum” and to creating a new space for “work on diversity, identity, and free speech” (Watanabe 2015).

While some of these measures, particularly efforts to increase diversity within the curriculum and faculty, might serve to support minority students in the challenges they face on campus, and thereby promote their developmental growth, many of these actions fail to address the root causes of campus unrest. The creation of new spaces and leadership positions may sound impressive, but it does not fill the need for a proactive, university-wide focus on student development. This need must be met through a mix of policies targeting different levels of students’ college experience, from classroom, to campus, to institution, with the ultimate aim of encouraging students to engage with peers of different backgrounds in a manner that promotes learning.

As Claremont McKenna’s policies were largely reactive in nature and lacked an awareness of developmental learning, it is likely that the college will continue to grapple with adverse student responses to controversy. Indeed, the campus experienced further unrest in the past year alone—5 students received suspensions for disrupting and attempting to shut down the presentation of Heather MacDonald, a conservative who had written numerous articles criticizing the Black Lives Matter movement (Friedersdorf 2017). While this incident caused less division within the campus community relative to the 2015 protests, it is evidence that Claremont McKenna may continue to struggle with student unrest in the future, especially in the absence of policies that are designed with the goals of developmental learning in mind.
Absence of university understanding of developmental theory

In both the University of Missouri and Claremont McKenna case studies, it is apparent that there exists a pervasive lack of understanding of the research on developmental learning among universities. This is a significant problem, as theories of developmental learning address the exact processes by which students benefit from higher education, as well as the mechanisms by which universities can ensure that they are promoting student development. If universities are not aware of this research, they run the risk of implementing policies that ignore students’ developmental journey and needs, and thus stand to hamper the developmental growth of their student bodies.

This issue is particularly significant in light of the trends in campus unrest universities have seen in recent years. While some of the reforms that institutions like the University of Missouri and Claremont McKenna College have enacted were successful in quelling student protests, the overall effect of these reforms was to treat the symptoms rather than the root causes of adverse student reactions to controversy. Reforms that might actually serve to aid universities in managing campus unrest are proactive in nature—rather than simply creating new buildings, names, positions, and initiatives that address unrest in real time, universities must focus on devising approaches to discussing controversial issues that lead to lasting changes within students’ experience of higher education. These approaches must necessarily be rooted in the research on developmental theories of learning, which both sheds light on why students may respond adversely to controversy and offers a foundation for developing solutions to this problem. Equally as important, these strategies should take into account the research on minority student experiences of college, as universities cannot properly support the development of all students without supporting minorities in the unique challenges they face on campus.
In today’s often volatile and exceedingly polarized world, students must be capable of engaging with controversy in a way that allows for the free and respectful exchange of ideas between diverse peoples. If universities wish to uphold their commitments to creating critical thinkers and promoting interactions between a diverse student body, then they have an inherent responsibility to support students in grappling with controversial issues. The ultimate goal of this project was to help universities facilitate discussions of controversial issues in a way that encourages students to engage with those who disagree with them, but especially ensures that marginalized voices are empowered to participate. In this way, universities can foster optimal levels of developmental growth within students, with the greater goal of creating reflective thinkers that are tolerant of diverse peoples and ideas.
Works Cited


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