

Learning to Listen in Polarized Times

The time students spend on our campuses may be their best and last opportunity to learn how to have conversations across racial, cultural and ideological differences, writes Ronald A. Crutcher.

By [Ronald A. Crutcher \(/users/ronald-crutcher\)](#) // January 27, 2021

"Whiplash" perhaps best describes our current national moment.

On Jan. 6, insurrectionists -- fueled by vitriolic rhetoric, lies and hate -- violently breached the U.S. Capitol and tried to overturn the will of the people. Then on Jan. 20, we watched the peaceful transition of power on the same Capitol steps that were a site of violence and chaos just two weeks earlier.

While the news has been dizzying, higher education must recognize this moment as a clarion call to reassert our values and redouble our efforts to graduate the next generation of thoughtful, engaged citizens who can help our country live up to its promise of "e pluribus unum."

Colleges and universities have traditionally served as crucibles for learning how to live and participate constructively in a democratic society. They have strived to prepare students to be active listeners committed to engaging meaningfully with diverse viewpoints, even when what they hear knocks them off balance. During the past several years, however, the politics and rhetoric inflaming Washington, D.C., have spilled over to foment campus climates in which even the most innocent inquiry can become suspect. Students demonstrating over controversial speech and campus speakers have even led to faculty firings and resignations, from Yale University to Evergreen State College.

While these demonstrations are isolated, they could lead to an entrenched culture in which those who espouse controversial views are shamed and silenced, unless we as educators do more to teach and model substantive dialogue and disagreement.

Six out of 10 students today can recall an instance when they self-censored opinions because they worried how their peers or professors would respond, according to a [recent survey \(https://speech.collegepulse.com/\)](https://speech.collegepulse.com/) from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, RealClearEducation and College Pulse. How can anyone learn anything if they are afraid of making a mistake, or offending, or asking an insensitive question?

College and university leaders bear responsibility for promulgating this environment. We have failed to heed fundamental lessons from the civil rights era. You cannot foster more inclusive communities simply by building more diverse communities. In the '60s, many of us naively believed that if we opened institutions to people of all

backgrounds that higher education institutions would somehow magically transform into more welcoming places. But most students, whatever their color or background, come to college with little experience building cross-cultural relationships. As we now recognize, we must be intentional about leveraging diversity as an educational benefit if we are to succeed in graduating empathetic listeners capable of navigating and bridging divides.

Building Intercultural Community

Free speech is the single greatest tool we have to build a more inclusive society. Many of my peers and I learned this lesson in the 1960s as students when we participated in peaceful protests and sit-ins to fight for our rights on campus -- a far cry from the insurrectionists who stormed Capitol Hill, incited to violence by the president. Yet more recently, a culture of "safetyism" has taken root. While well meaning, insulating young people from those who may offend their sensibilities does little to prepare them for the hard and long-term work of persuading others to embrace diversity, equity and inclusion. Worse, it perpetuates a troubling societal trend toward demonizing those whose beliefs rattle our own.

The time students spend on college campuses may be their last and best opportunity to learn how to have conversations across racial, cultural and ideological differences. A task force convened at my institution, the University of Richmond, concluded that for the health of our democracy, we must teach students that a "commitment to fostering a diverse, inclusive community demands an equally strong commitment to freedom of expression."

This is no easy task. As the legislators who tried to prevent the certification of the legally elected next president of the United States remind us, words have consequences -- and free expression can not only instruct; it can hurt and divide. Power and position matter, too, and some students, including underrepresented students, may feel that they have unequal access to the microphone, leaving them little choice but to shut down debate. Yet as the [late John Lewis reminds us \(https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html), we all hold the power to advance inclusion through "good trouble" -- by speaking up, calling out injustice and seeking change through the democratic process. This approach worked during the civil rights movement, and it can work again today.

To succeed, colleges and universities must recommit to helping students become active listeners with the inner strength to weather the challenging and even offensive views they will inevitably encounter in democratic life. My experience as a cellist in a chamber ensemble -- and often the only person of color in any room -- has taught me that if you actively listen, even when the chords are dissonant, the harmonies can resolve into a single, complex musical composition made better by its many parts.

At Richmond, my wife, Betty Neal Crutcher, and I host mentoring groups, composed of students of all backgrounds and beliefs, in which we model substantive conversations across divides. We ask all our mentees to complete the Heterodox Academy's OpenMind platform, which equips them with [evidence-based techniques](#)

<https://openmindplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Takeaway.pdf>) to navigate differences, including pausing before responding, asking nonjudgmental questions for understanding and speaking with humility.

One conversation among our mentees is emblematic of how such techniques work in practice. A young man made a statement that offended the group's students of color, filling the air with tension. No one seemed to know what to say until a woman of color cut through the silence by practicing a skill that my wife and I had sought to hone in the group: not responding immediately to troubling comments and remembering that they sometimes come across in unintended ways. Rather than react out of emotion, this young woman took a deep breath and respectfully shared her perspective. Other students in the room followed suit, asking the young man questions, not to corner him or make him feel bad but to better understand his thinking. Through the exchange of viewpoints, not silencing or shaming, the young man understood why he caused offense. And the other students saw firsthand how listening actively and speaking with humility can make other people more receptive to rethinking their position.

We in higher education have no shortage of opportunities to inculcate in our students a commitment to active listening and free expression, from orientation and first-year seminars to mentee groups and living-learning communities. If we can teach our students to navigate their differences with curious minds and demonstrate patience, discipline and empathy, I am confident we will launch them into the world better equipped to strengthen pluralistic democracy and build an America that makes one out of many.

Bio

Ronald A. Crutcher is president of the University of Richmond. His thematic memoir, I Had No Idea You Were Black: Navigating Race on the Road to Leadership, will be published by [Clyde Hill Publishing](https://clydehillpublishing.com/product/no-idea-you-were-black/) (<https://clydehillpublishing.com/product/no-idea-you-were-black/>) next month.

Read more by [Ronald A. Crutcher \(/users/ronald-crutcher/\)](/users/ronald-crutcher/).