Beyond the Moral Panic of "Student Self-Censorship": Students' Ethical Framing of Difficult Classroom Discussions

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To read higher education focused news articles and op-eds over the past few years, one might form a mental image of college campuses as quiet, fearful places, devoid of any real discussion or debate, patrolled by mobs of "woke" students eager to report faculty members or other students for the slightest perceived offense. Writing for the Real Clear Education blog, Nathan Harden (2021) described an "epidemic of fearful silence" and a "plague of self-censorship" that "raged on" (para. 2) on college campuses, comparing the apparent limitations on students' speech to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a *Newsweek* op-ed, Cherise Trump (2021), Executive Director of Speech First, claimed that students are subject to "brainwashing" on campus and decried the consequences of "violations of the unspoken rule: 'Thou shalt not upset the woke mob'" (para. 2). These are just two examples of the way that the rhetoric around student self-censorship on college campuses has risen to the level of a "moral panic" (Hobbs, 2021) – an "overreaction to forms of deviance or wrong doing believed to be threats to the moral order," often invoking "specific events or problems as symbols of what many feel to represent 'all that is wrong with the nation'" (Drisland & Parkinson 2002, para. 1). Moral panics stem from an "anxious concern on the part of certain social actors that an established value system is being threatened… that a cherished way of life is in jeopardy" (Garland 2008, p. 11).

This narrative around the censorious nature of college students is often presented as descriptive and evidence-based, drawing from large-scale surveys of college students (e.g., FIRE, 2021; Gallup, 2020; Zhou et al., 2022). Yet, these surveys are based in normative stances on how college students should interact with one another that often go unexamined. For example, one popular survey, conducted by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE, 2021), has the express purpose of ranking colleges and universities based on "the level of tolerance for free speech on campus" (p. 2). The way this tolerance is measured implies a stance that absolute openness to all perspectives, no matter how offensive, is the goal in higher education. On the other hand, much of the normative work in this area, generally taking the form of op-eds in the mainstream or higher education media, is similarly disconnected from empirical evidence, often based on personal experience or anecdotes (e.g., Camp, 2022).

However, what these narratives fail to recognize is that classroom discussions, particularly around controversial issues, are not neutral spaces; they are spaces that are rife with ethical dilemmas, forcing students to weigh competing values in deciding whether, when, how, and to whom to speak (Niehaus, 2021). Instead of helping to diagnose and solve real challenges, these surveys fuel the moral panic around student self-censorship, leading to counterintuitive and counterproductive measures such as efforts by Boards of Trustees and state legislatures to regulate speech on campus (Friedman & Tager, 2022). The moral panic narrative also exacerbates students' fears about speaking up on campus; if students believe that everyone around them is self-censoring, they are likely to do so as well (Niehaus, 2021).

As Stein et al. (2019) noted, "different ethical frameworks offer different diagnoses of the problems we face, and different propositions as to how we should respond." (p. 25). Understanding how students frame the ethical dilemmas in classroom discussions can help us see a fuller picture of the social realities of speech and expression in higher education, leading to a more complex, nuanced understanding of the phenomenon; reducing polarization and reactionary narratives that perpetuate barriers to robust engagement with complex issues; and helping educators develop interventions to help students navigate these complex ethical issues.

1. Understanding Students' Ethical Framing

Given the need for a new ethical framework for understanding the challenges of difficult classroom discussions, the purpose of this fellowship project was to explore how college students themselves experience these challenges. To do this, I, along with four research assistants, interviewed college students across seven diverse colleges and universities between the fall of 2020 and the spring of 2023. This project builds and expands up on the work I did during my initial fellowship with the Center, where I focused on how White students make decisions about speaking up on controversial issues in class discussions.

Students across all seven institutions were first recruited to participate in a survey through email, social media, and/or fliers posted on campus; for the purposes of this report, the main function of the survey was to serve as a basis for selecting interview participants who would represent a wide range of demographic characteristics (age, gender identity, racial/ethnic identity), political perspectives, and perspectives on free speech issues on campus. Students could participate in a series of two different interviews. The first interview focused on scenarios where another student made a comment in class that was potentially offensive to police officers in one scenario and potentially offensive to Black Lives Matter protestors in another scenario. The second interview focused on students' own choices about when, whether, and how to speak up in class discussions around controversial issues. Due to the racialized nature of the scenarios discussed in the first interview, I matched participant and interviewer (myself or one of the graduate student interviewers involved in the project) based on racial identities as closely as possible.

The findings below reflect interviews with 55 students across 7 diverse colleges and universities; 36 students completed both interviews while 19 only completed the first. All participants were undergraduate students who did not identify as international students. Key institution and participant information is summarized in the Appendix.

Consistent with grounded theory methods, I engaged in data collection and data analysis simultaneously (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Morse & Clark, 2019). I began with just a few initial interviews, wrote extensive memos after each interview, and then did an initial round of data analysis using Corbin and Strauss's (2008) initial coding approach. Based on that initial analysis, I then selected additional participants who could best inform an understanding of the emerging phenomena I was seeing in the data, conducted additional analysis, and then selected additional participants (Morse & Clarke, 2019). For this report specifically, I then engaged in open and axial coding (Charmaz, 2014), focusing on the ethical dilemmas students were describing in classroom discussions.

2. Findings: It's Complicated

As I conducted more and more interviews, and listened to and read over the transcripts of interviews conducted by other members of my research team, one idea kept coming up over and over - "it's complicated." This was evidenced by the fact that nearly all, if not all, of the participants said "I don't know" many times throughout their interviews. Letting the data guide my analysis, I then followed that theme and started to explore the data for what exactly is so complicated about classroom discussions. Through that analysis, I came to understand the importance of understanding the historical context in which these classroom discussions are situated, and within that context, the complexity of questions of knowledge, community, harm, responsibility, and character that arise as students think through what should or should not be said in a class discussion.

2.1 The Context: No More "Good Old Days"

One thing that became evident in my analysis was the disconnect between how students were thinking about their classroom experiences and what I typically hear in discussions about speech controversies on campus. Often the discourse around campus speech issues reflects broader perception that there was a time when faculty and students could have rousing debates about just about anything without being afraid of offending anyone (e.g., Cruz, 2021; Haidt, 2016; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Soave & Coaston, 2019). But this was never really the case (Franks, 2019). Throughout the history of higher education in the United States, a variety of perspectives have been excluded from campus discourse (e.g., Gerard, 2021; Parker, 2015; Regents of the University of California, 1950), which contributed to a perception of free and open discourse among those who were allowed to be part of that discourse. As one of the participants, Mark, said, "I think if you're in a class of just White people and people that look and think exactly like you, it's easier to say more insensitive things." Obviously, college classrooms have changed a lot over the past few decades, although of course we still have a long way to go in increasing access and equity in higher education. But the increasing diversity of our college campuses and classrooms has made it impossible, or at least very difficult, for anyone to pretend that people can just say whatever they want, whenever they want, however they want – and students recognize this. As Maddie explained,

> not everybody's gonna be the same. We're all gonna come from different socioeconomic, ethnic groups. We're all gonna be different. And with that, we're each gonna have things that kind of are hurtful to us or things that we might be, like, ignorant of if they aren't hurtful to us.

Students also discussed other contextual layers that make classroom conversations complicated: social media, of course, but also everything else going on in the world that affects us all. As students well understood, our classrooms are not somehow walled off from racial injustice, pandemics, or political strife. In thinking about conversations touching on issues of BLM and the police, for example,

Daniel reflected,

> as heavy as politics is right now, and the height of it as we are in right now, everybody is going literally, like they have their walls up and they're just ready to dispute pretty much [everything], and pretty much prove that they're right.

Sarah similarly said, "I think 2020 is exposing a lot of situations that are deep and complex and there's no really right answer, wrong answer, it's kind of just figuring it out."

2.2 Knowledge: What is it? What counts? Who has it? How do you get it? What is it for?

Digging in further to what exactly is so complicated in classroom discussions, Sarah's comment highlights that most of the things that are worth discussing in class involve issues where there is no clear right and wrong answer. In many classroom discussions, this leaves students grappling with questions about what it means to know something, how to know if something is true or just an opinion, and whether or not that even matters. For example, when I asked Ferdinand whether or not it matters if an offensive comment is true or not, he said,

> I think the truth value of the comment matters… a statement of fact like that I think would be fine, but a statement of an opinion, I'm not sure how to how to phrase it exactly but, like a statement of opinion that kind of reflects something, even if it is mostly or fully true, that is attacking people for their identity, would be wrong, but maybe not as, or will be more wrong than, I'm getting going in circles in my head.

Ferdinand struggled with this question, acknowledging that truth might not be an absolute ("even if it is mostly or fully true"), but then also unsure of how much to weigh the relative truth of a statement in determining whether or not it is okay to say or not.

This is not to say that students don't have any ideas about what is and is not true, or what does or does not count as legitimate knowledge. A number of students talked about how when you make a comment in class, you have to back it up with evidence. For example, V said, "When you make any argument, I feel like you need concrete evidence. You can't go on just personal bias alone."

What evidence counts to back up a claim in class, though, isn't always easy to figure out; for many students, personal experience or even religious faith played a role in what they considered to be valid justification for an assertion in a class discussion. This was particularly evident when students talked about whether the racial identity of a speaker making offensive comments about BLM protestors matters. There was a lot of disagreement on that question, but Abby highlighted how some students struggle with this question. As she explained,

> Knowing if he's Black, I would say that because he's Black his words have a lot more weight because if he's saying that he must have personal experience… But I guess, oh, gosh, the same thing could happen if Jamie's White. It doesn't matter if you're White, you're Black, you can see the same things and see the same issues…. I guess I stand by my original point. It's just, gosh, I'm having trouble articulating this. But if Jamie was Black, I would hold his words with more caution and worth than if someone who's White said that.

For Abby, a speaker having personal experience with an issue made them a more reliable source of information, and she would take their comments more seriously than if that same comment came from a speaker without personal experience. Kennedy, on the other hand, highlighted how personal experience with a topic can cause some folks to discount what someone says, rather than giving more weight to it. As she explained,

> sometimes people won't listen to you, as a person of color like sometimes people won't hear it from me, but they'll hear it from another person who's saying the exact same thing, like I could literally write a script and be like here say this to them and they hear it versus just seeing me and see my identity first and being like Oh well… you have too much personal stake in this or something like that and making it easy to write me off versus, where if a White person says that they're more likely to listen.

This difficulty in figuring out what is true, to what extent truth matters, and what counts as valid evidence can contribute to a lot of uncertainty over how you can even figure out who is right and wrong. As Lisa reflected,

> Maybe I think that what he said was wrong, but he thinks what he said was right… maybe he truly believes that's right. Who's going to say that I'm wrong or he's right or he's wrong and I'm right? Nobody. There's no, like, rule book on this stuff…. And I just think that there's no way to prove that he is wrong… the only way is to feel that he's wrong.

For Lisa, and many other students, issues for which there is no one clear right answer were difficult to navigate, making it difficult to know who was right and wrong in a conversation.

The question of who has knowledge and what counts as a legitimate foundation for knowledge claims also played a role in how students saw their own role, and the role of other students, in class discussions. For some students, everyone brings a form of knowledge to a class discussion, and the point is to learn from one another. As Eve explained,

> at its core, a classroom is supposed to be a space where people gather together and share nuances of ideas, because you can have your own opinion, that is the most important thing about academics is having your own opinion. But then sometimes we wanna hear others' opinions, too. Not because ours isn't great, or like to make ours better, it's just to simply hear from other opinions. 'Cause there is not one human ever who has had all of the opinions and who has had all of the right opinions ever. So, in my opinion, a classroom was built to share opinions with others, whether that's right or wrong.

Eve cared much less than Lucy did about figuring out who was right and wrong and saw class as a time to learn lots of different perspectives from lots of different people. Jason, on the other hand, saw knowledge as more concrete, as something that existed in the world, and his role in college was to learn the facts he needed to learn for his future job as an architect:

> college is not the time where I'm supposed to be talking. I'm supposed to be learning more than I'm supposed to be talking… This is the foundation for my education and the foundation for my job. The specific opinions don't necessarily change the facts. The fact is, a doorway should be at least three feet wide… I'm learning a lot about the facts. I really have no time for the opinions.

For Eve, sitting in a class where everyone shares their perspectives and opinions is the point of college; for Jason, that same class discussion is a waste of time.

2.3 Community: What do we owe each other in a classroom community? What do we owe each other as human beings?

The question of what role students play in class discussions led into a second set of complicated questions about our obligations to one another as members of a classroom community, or just as other human beings. If the point (or at least *a* point) of a class discussion is to learn from one another, students recognize that this means that their contributions should further this goal – and sometimes that means not saying anything. As Nora explained, "you need to create a space where the maximum amount of people feel comfortable sharing the maximum amount, not just one person… I do believe in we're a community, we're interconnected, and we need to look out for everybody else too." Kennedy went further, explaining, "Sometimes if I think it would be better for, like, the sake of the class in general then I would keep my thoughts to myself just to like keep conversation flowing and so we could still be getting things out of it, it would just not be exactly what I was thinking… I also don't know if it would further the conversation for everyone." Maddie similarly reflected,

> is me expressing my disagreement really, really worth it? Is it going to be beneficial to the class? Is it going to do anything more than just, like, impress upon them that I think you're wrong and I'm right? If I felt like the class really could benefit, or the conversation really could benefit from me expressing like an alternative opinion, then maybe I would, but I would obviously try to do that in really like loving, and what's the word? constructive way.

For these students, and others like them, there is an ethical obligation to express themselves in a way that can be helpful to other students individually, and to the community of students in the class as a whole. Staying silent was sometimes the best way to fulfill this obligation.

At the same time, some students recognized that if folks don't speak up in class, that can be just as unproductive as if they do. To some extent, students have an obligation to one another to contribute to the discussion. As Eve mentioned in the previous section, the point of a class discussion is to hear different perspectives, and that can only happen if other students speak up. Additionally, as Eve described of her own experience,

> silence does not mean there are no opinions, right? It just means they're not sharing them out loud. So even if they did have an opinion that I disagreed with or was racist, I'd rather them tell me that than think it and stay quiet, you know?...And it's just like that's not helping anyone... it makes you feel insecure, because it's like, well why is no one speaking, you know?

Not only do other students have an obligation to speak up so that others can benefit from different perspectives, but staying silent can also have unintended negative consequences for others in the class.

Beyond the obligation that many students felt to find a way to constructively contribute to everyone's learning in class, many students also reflected a feeling of obligation to one another as human beings. As Tony described,

> You don't wanna hurt other people... You don't know whether the people are coming from, where they've gone through, what they've experienced. You have to be sensitive to each other... You do have to be able to talk about things, but you just, you're talking about subjects such as that, you have to be real careful not to... [say] things that would hurt somebody or have a negative effect on them. I mean, it's just part of, you know, being nice.

For Tony and other students who shared this perspective, showing kindness and care for others was a paramount consideration in how they acted in classroom discussions. Of course, as with everything, this is not totally straightforward. Yes, students were acknowledging that they needed to be considerate of others, that they needed to take into consideration other students' learning and well-being and not just their own, but you can't always anticipate how things are going to affect others. Alexander, for example, explained,

> did I know that that was going to happen? Did I know their circumstances? If so, then I should have picked a better time and place to say that, wherein they would not be as affected by that. However, without that knowledge, then what way is there to test that sort of thing?... I would think it would not make sense for [a student] to go, "Now, is there anyone that has personally been affected by this?" And then digest every possible way that someone could have been affected, and then go on to make a statement.

Although most students did acknowledge some sort of obligation to others in the class, navigating that obligation was complicated.

2.4 Harm: What does it mean to cause harm in a class discussion? Who is a legitimate victim of harm? To what extent does consent mitigate harm?

The reason students are grappling with what they owe each other when considering what is and is not okay to say in a classroom discussion is that many students perceive the potential for speech to cause harm to other students in some way. As Hailey explained, when an offensive comment is made in class,

> if you had a room and the majority of people were White and they were sharing opinions that the average person outside of that classroom would find to be problematic in some way or, like, uncomfortable, like offensive and say there's only one Black student in that classroom, I would be concerned... you wouldn't want, like, you wouldn't want the, like, one woman in a room of male engineers to feel like they shouldn't be in the room.... there's still a huge disparity in like the number of Black students who are graduating from high school, like people who are not as wealthy, people who like just people from rural areas, from underfunded cities, a black brown indigenous people where if they're like a first generation college student or like a first generation like high school student even... it's just gonna make those more marginalized people feel like they shouldn't be there.

Kennedy similarly described that when a comment rises to the level of targeted hate speech, it can have a negative effect, particularly on students of color in the room. As she explained,

> As [a] person of color like you can tell what hate speech is like when you're like, Oh, I feel like literally a shitty human being... it has, like, an impact on, like, your mental health and... it can cause I think, like, issues with your identity.

Both Hailey and Kennedy saw the potential for harm being connected to the larger context in which some students are already marginalized, and comments made in class can exacerbate that existing marginalization.

Particularly given the larger debate about the relationship between speech and harm (e.g., Delgado & Stefancic, 2018; Khalid & Snyder, 2023; Strosson, 2018; Waldron, 2012), it is important to note that many students did differentiate types of harm, and there was not universal agreement on what kinds of speech do and do not cause harm. Wendy illustrated the difficulty of defining and identifying potential harm, at one point hesitating about calling a student's negative comment about police officers harmful:

> Harm is also a strong word… I don't know if that's really harm, but I feel like it's definitely… some type of emotional or mental toll on someone if their group that they're related to is associated with a negative term.

Later, however, Wendy explained that this "emotional or mental toll" can, in fact, be harmful:

> even if it's like bullying that's still harmful, you know, like emotionally to be, if they start, "Oh you're a thug," you're this, you're that, you're a pig. That's draining and hurtful. You know, even if it's not physical harm, that's still a type of harm and it's just wrong.

Other students, however, did not see any real harm in the scenarios we discussed in the interviews. When prompted with a question about how other students in a class might be affected by a negative comment about police or BLM protestors, these students focused, for example, on other students being surprised or uncomfortable, having a negative view of the speaker, or disagreeing with the speaker, but did not seem to view these reactions as reflecting harm. However, this did not mean that they all thought that it would be okay for a student to express something harmful; rather, these students' responses reflect variation in views of what is and is not harmful. As an example of this, Lenny stated outright that in the scenario where a student made a negative comment about BLM protestors that comment "isn't necessarily harmful," but he did see harm as a consideration when deciding what is and is not okay to say in class. As he explained, "you can't really form an argument for censoring someone under basically any circumstances… so long as you're in the bounds of you're not causing anybody direct harm."

In the interviews, the juxtaposition of offensive comments about BLM protestors and about cops raised questions about how we might weigh the relative harm caused by those comments. Many students saw the potential harm in both scenarios to be equivalent, but for other students one group was a more legitimate victim of harm than the other. Gina, for example, did not like the offensive comments about either group, but she had a particularly strong emotional reaction to the comment about police officers – both because she has police officers in her family, and because she has a strong orientation towards respect for authority. She explained,

> It's disrespectful to the line of work. Being a police officer is more than just driving a car that goes, "Wee-woo." They are constantly putting their life on the line… And so, to sit there and call them a pig and disrespect everything that is beyond just that moment, I think that's horrible.

Many other students, however, discounted the potential harm caused by making an offensive comment about police officers because police officers choose that job, while being Black is not a choice. Kennedy put this very succinctly when she explained,

> cops, in my opinion, like signed up for this job, and they can also like quit this job anytime so if they don't want to deal with the backlash they get of like getting called names or getting criticized for the job that they do, they could just quit, but like I couldn't like be un-Black.

For many students, it was worse to insult someone based on a characteristic that they didn't choose – race, gender identity, religious identity, etc. – than it was to insult someone based on something they did choose – for example, a particular profession.

This idea of consent mitigating harm came up in another context as well – whether or not someone chose to be part of the conversation where the offensive comment was made. Nora explained this idea, saying,

> I also think it depends on the setting a little bit, like a high school classroom's a little different to me than a college class that, like a college class you get to choose to take it… a high school history class… you have to take it. And I think, like, I would like it if the class description said like we're gonna be talking about these difficult topics ahead of time… so that somebody who wouldn't feel comfortable with that doesn't have to take the class… I think that everybody deserves choice and autonomy and like freedom about what they subject themselves to and what they choose to discuss…. it is important to put yourself in uncomfortable positions, but I think you should be choosing to do that because that feels, like, much more toxic if you aren't choosing to subject yourself to that.

For Nora, a student making an informed choice to be part of a conversation where potentially harmful, offensive things might be said mitigated the harm that student could experience.

2.5 Responsibility: What does it mean to be morally responsible for one's speech? Does intent matter? Who is more or less culpable, and why?

When students do see the potential for harm in offensive classroom speech, that then raises questions of moral responsibility and consequences. For many students, a big question of moral responsibility came down to a question of whether or not the student knew better, often reflected in the question of whether this was a first-time comment or something that the student was known to do frequently. As Jason explained,

> I think once you are made aware of issues, if you continue using [offensive language] you're a d*... But if you honestly don't know, I think it's up to the other party to at least, they don't have to educate you, but they should at least be like, hey, that's not right. Follow up on that. I think once you're made aware of it, it's your responsibility to become better, but for [the] first time, I think if he's truly honest, I think the most important part of it is if they recognize what their actions did, and made honest attempts to rectify it.

Maddie expressed a similar sentiment to Jason, noting that individuals need to learn from their mistakes. However, she then also struggled with the idea of whether or not a person could be held responsible for other people's response to a comment. She explained,

> You control what you say to people, how you respond to other people, to situations, whatever. You control you. What you don't control, what you're not in charge of is how other people respond to you... I'm not trying to say, oh, well that's on them for reacting like that. It's on them for getting offended. I realize that's apathetic, I don't mean it apathetic, I don't mean to sound like that. But, at the same time... I think that would be a lot to kind of pin on you know, [an] 18, 19 year old for saying something, especially when they were like, what, you know this is not what I'm used to.

For Jason and Maddie, the issue of moral responsibility is complicated. They both felt that students should be able to make mistakes, receive feedback, and learn to do better, but also recognized that it is not always clear who is responsible when someone is offended.

A key question when it came to the idea of responsibility for how one's speech might affect others was whether intent matters: does it matter if the student had a good intention in making the comment even if it had a negative impact? Jason reflected the tension in this question, at one point focusing on impact, conceding that "if there were a scenario where it wouldn't hurt anybody and that's for sure, then yeah, that's fine." Later, though, Jason focused a lot more on intent, saying,

> I think intent matters a lot... If he was making an honest attempt to be better and recognize what he said once he was called out for it, then I think that's a situation where they can progress and go forward with the conversation. But if he was just trying to get a rise out of that student, or student population, then yeah. He's being a d* and you need to address it.

Jeff, however, focused on impact, explaining,

> I think the outcome matters more because you don't know a person's intent... We don't know what a person's intent is until somebody else hears that and they're like wait, what did you mean by that so like I think the like aftermath matters more than the intent.

Just as Maddie acknowledged that you cannot always know how someone else will respond to what you say, Jeff acknowledged that we can never really fully know someone else's intent. For Tony,

however, the impact doesn't matter; even if there is no negative impact, it still isn't okay to make offensive comments. As he explained, "it is never okay to speak that way… Integrity is who you are when no one's watching… Even if you're being watched by people you know are similar, like, minds, if you say it that way, it's still hurtful."

2.6 Character (or Virtue): To what extent does speech reflect on a person's moral character? To what extent should it?

Tony's comment highlights a final point about why classroom speech is so complicated: the question of the extent to which we do or should make judgements about a person's character based on what they say. Many of the conversations with students about intent came down to this question of character. As Jenny explained,

> you never want to purposely hurt people like that, and I think it's a really bad reflection of your character to be saying stuff out loud like that… you can extrapolate how he's going to act in other situations too because a lot of the times when it's issues like that, it's not just a single thing. This is coming with a lot of other opinions at the same time. And I feel like it makes him look, I don't know, it just makes them sound very rash and very single minded and aggressive. And it brings up all these words that I would think of bad character. And it makes me think, oh, he probably has other bad opinions too and he's probably not a good person…

For Jenny, students do not just make comments out of the blue; those comments will generally reflect a broader pattern of opinions and behaviors and give you insight into that person's character. Nora, however, got into the complexity of this, explaining,

> In some ways I think what people say is irrelevant… I mean, obviously they might be saying something that we misinterpret or they're playing devil's advocate or they're exploring an idea a little bit. But I think a lot of the times when people say something like that, that is reflective of where they are. And where they are in this case might be a little bit of ignorance more than full on prejudice, but, and of course that could be reflective of them too…. I think there's no such thing as, like, bad people or good people. I certainly make a lot of inferences about who people are based on stuff they stay in class, what their views are, what their language is, where they're coming at things from. I don't think I'm making an inference of, like, who they are permanently or whether they're a bad or good person, but I'm definitely reading a lot off of what they say. And, I mean, I can go and be like, "Oh, we shouldn't be judging one another." Like we don't, but like that's kind of, we do. We look at what people wear, we look at everything about a person that we notice. And what people say verbally is a big peer into that picture. And I think that we should be open-minded about receiving more pieces of information about that person that might contradict the initial image we came across. But I guess I'm saying I'm not inherently against reading stuff off of what people say, just I don't know how much to do with what I do read… and I think morality is, like, extremely complicated.

For Nora, students' comments can be driven by many different motivations, some of which do and some of which do not reflect their underlying character. At the same time, though, Nora acknowledged that our perceptions of people's character comes from many different pieces of information, and what they say is one more piece of information to inform our understanding of who they are. Yet, Nora acknowledged that this is, yet again, complicated.

Regardless of whether or not a comment made in a class discussion should reflect on a student's character, students perceived real consequences for these potential character judgements. Who students are inside the classroom is not walled off from who they are, and how they are perceived by others, outside of the classroom. To some extent this connects to social media, but perhaps even more importantly, this is due to the nature of college, particularly for a traditional residential college campus. A number of students who we interviewed reflected on this connection between relationships in and out of the classroom. For example, Eve said "it's not like… you separate your academics from your social life." If students do make character judgements about each other from class discussions, those character judgements extend beyond that one class discussion.

Another complicating factor with the relationships students have in and out of the classroom is the fact that for many students, the social connections they make in college are likely to turn into professional relationships after they graduate. This was particularly the case for students in professionally oriented majors like architecture, education, and athletic training. Emily, for example, said,

> When I do the cost-benefit analysis a lot of times I feel like it'd be more worth it to maintain a solid working relationship. Yes, there could be certain things benefitted by bringing up those different ideas and getting to think about it, but then in the end I feel like in a lot of these situations it's like how I get along and work with people I'm around will end up being more important because it just improves the quality of relationships in the workplace.

Jason similarly reflected, "I'm [in college] to learn and try and make some connections. I don't necessarily want to squander those just based off of a single point of view." For students in these majors, the classroom was not a space for free-wheeling discussions of controversial ideas, but rather a space for professionalism and developing professional connections. They would not expect to make or hear offensive comments in the workplace, so why would they do so in class?

3. Strategies to Encourage Robust Classroom Discussions

The way we understand the "problem" of free speech on college campuses ultimately directs the types of solutions we develop to address that problem. For example, if the problem is that students with particular political perspectives are being stifled and their rights are being violated, it would be logical to look to judicial and legislative remedies (e.g., DeSantis, 2021; FIRE, 2022). If the problem is that students are coddled and lack resilience, the solution may be to expose students to more challenging situations so they can learn how to cope with adversity (e.g., Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). If, however, we understand the "problem" not as a problem, but as a series of challenges facing students as they navigate the moral and ethical complexities of discussing controversial issues with diverse peers, that leads to a very different set of solutions.

As detailed above, these issues are complicated, and there is no easy solution. However, there are a number of strategies that those who care about issues of robust, productive classroom discussions can employ to help.

First, just as many colleges and universities require students to take courses in order to have the skills needed for college-level writing, institutions could also require students to take courses on dialogue in order to have the skills needed to engage in classroom discussions around difficult topics. There are a number of evidence-based models for dialogue programs that are designed for, or can be adapted for, college classroom settings. Intergroup dialogue, for example, has been shown to positively affect students' motivation and skills for engaging in dialogue across gender, racial, and political differences (Frantell et al., 2019; Gurin et al., 2013; Hess et al., 2010; Zúñiga et al., 2007). Importantly, just as writing is taught as a stand-alone course and then integrated throughout the curriculum, the skills that students learn in a dialogue course must also be reinforced and practiced throughout their college experience.

Second, recognizing the ethical dimensions of the challenges students face in discussing controversial issues in the classroom can provide an opportunity to engage students in discussions of these very ethical issues. Many of the questions raised by students in this study map on to deep philosophical questions around issues of epistemology (Steup & Neta, 2020), virtue ethics (Dillon, 2017; Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018), consequentialism (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2022), harm and offense (DaVia, 2022), victimhood (Govier, 2015), ethics of care (Held, 2005; Keller & Kittay, 2017), moral responsibility (Talbert, 2019), consent (Dempsey, 2013; Feinberg, 1989), dignity (Schroeder & Bani-Sadr, 2017), and contractualism (Scanlon, 2000). Acknowledging these questions outright, and engaging with philosophical works on these topics, may be quite helpful for students and faculty alike, particularly if it is done in a way that helps students and faculty connect philosophy to their everyday experiences.

Finally, those who care about robust dialogue on college campuses should make a concerted effort to change the narrative around the state of free speech on college campuses. Promoting a narrative of a free speech or "self-censorship" crisis does not encourage students and faculty to engage with controversial issues. Instead, it can have the opposite effect, driving censorious policies and legislation, and actually making it more likely that students will hold back their own views in class (Niehaus, 2021).

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5. Appendix

The seven institutions included in this study were:

- A large, public, historically White, R1 institution in the Great Plains region of the U.S.;
- A large, public, historically White, R1 institution in the Mid-Atlantic;
- A large, public, Hispanic-serving, R1 institution on the West Coast;
- A mid-sized, private, religiously-affiliated, doctoral/professional institution in the South with a high percentage of Black and Hispanic students;
- A mid-sized, private, historically White, liberal arts college in the Mid-Atlantic; and
- Two small, private, historically White, liberal arts colleges in the Northeast.

Key demographic information for student participants:

- Age: 7 students were 18 years old at the time of the interview, 13 were 19 years old, 17 were 20 years old, 8 were 21 years old, 3 were 22 years old, 4 were 23-30 years old, and 3 were over 30 years old.
- Gender identity: 21 participants identified as men, 33 as women, and 1 as genderqueer/transmasculine.
- Political ideology: 6 identified as very conservative, 11 as somewhat conservative, 9 as middle-of-the-road, 10 as somewhat liberal, and 19 as very liberal.
- Race/ethnicity:
    - Alaska Native (1)
    - Asian American (6)
    - Asian American; /Hispanic/Latino/a/x (1)
    - Asian American; Bi/Multiracial; White (1)
    - Bi/Multiracial; Hispanic/Latino/a/x; White; South-American Indigenous (1)
    - Bi/Multiracial; Black/African American; Hispanic/Latino/a/x (1)
    - Black/African American (4)
    - Hispanic/Latino/a/x (7)
    - Hispanic/Latino/a/x; White (1)
    - Middle Eastern; White (1)
    - Native American; White (1)
    - White (30)

When asked how often they kept an opinion related to class to themselves because they were worried about the potential consequences of expressing that opinion, 3 responded “always,” 15 “often,” 21 “sometimes,” 10 “seldom,” and 6 “never.”