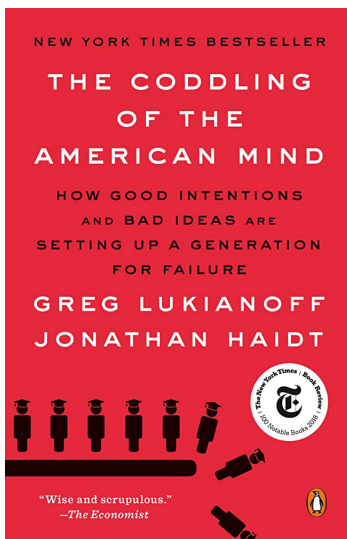


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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The Coddling of the American Mind

THE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION: THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM

This is a book about three Great Untruths that seem to have spread widely in recent years. While many propositions are untrue, in order to be classified as a Great Untruth, an idea must meet three criteria:

1. It contradicts ancient wisdom (ideas found widely in the wisdom literature of many cultures).
2. It contradicts modern psychological research on well-being.
3. It harms the individual and communities that embrace it.

We will show how these three Great Untruths—and the policies and political movements that draw on them—are causing problems for young people, universities, and, more generally, liberal democracies. Teen anxiety, depression, and suicide rates have risen sharply in the last few years. The culture on many college campuses has become more ideologically uniform, compromising the ability of scholars to seek truth, and of students to learn from a broad range of thinkers.

Extremists have proliferated on the far right and the far left, provoking one another to ever deeper levels of hatred. Social media has channeled partisan passions into the creation of a “callout culture” meaning anyone can be publicly shamed for saying something well-intentioned that someone else interprets

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uncharitably. New-media platforms and outlets allow citizens to retreat into self-confirmatory bubbles, where their worst fears about the evils of the other side can be confirmed and amplified by extremists and cyber trolls intent on sowing discord and division.

The three Great Untruths have flowered on many college campuses, but they have their roots in earlier education and childhood experiences, and they now extend from the campus into the corporate world and the public square, including national politics. They are also spreading outward from American universities to universities throughout the English-speaking world. These Great Untruths are bad for everyone. Anyone who cares about young people, education, or democracy should be concerned about these trends.

By the standards of our great-grandparents, nearly all of us are coddled. Each generation seems to see the one after it as weak, whiny, and lacking in resilience. These older generations may have a point, even though the generational changes reflect real and positive progress. In this book, we will show how well-intentioned overprotection—from peanut bans in elementary schools through speech codes on college campuses—may end up doing more harm than good.

PART I: THREE BAD IDEAS

CHAPTER 1. The Untruth of Fragility: What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Weaker

Of course, Nietzsche's original aphorism—"What doesn't kill me makes me strong"—is not entirely correct if taken literally. Some things that don't kill you can leave you permanently damaged and diminished. But teaching kids that failures, insults, and painful experiences will do lasting damage is harmful in and of itself.

Children, like many other complex adaptive systems, are anti-fragile. Their brains require a wide range of inputs from their environments in order to configure themselves for those environments. Like the immune system, children must be exposed to challenges and stressors (within limits, and in age-appropriate ways), or they will fail to mature into strong and capable adults, able to engage productively with people and ideas that challenge their beliefs and moral convictions.

In the twentieth century, the word "safety" generally meant physical safety. Concepts like trauma and safety have expanded so far since the 1980s that they are often employed in ways that are no longer grounded in legitimate psychological research. Grossly expanded conceptions of trauma and safety are used to justify the overprotection of children of all ages—even college students, who are sometimes said to need safe spaces and trigger warnings lest words and ideas put them in danger.

Safetyism is the cult of safety—an obsession with eliminating threats (both real and imagined) to the point at which people become unwilling to make reasonable tradeoffs demanded by other practical and moral concerns. The current preoccupation with safetyism deprives the young of the experiences that their antifragile minds need, thereby making them *more* fragile, anxious, and prone to seeing themselves as victims.

CHAPTER 2. The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: Always Trust Your Feelings

Should a student saying, "I am offended" be sufficient reason to cancel a lecture? What if it's many students? What if members of the faculty are offended, too? Among the most universal psychological insights in the world's wisdom

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traditions is, as Epictetus put it, “*What really frightens and dismays us is not external events themselves but the way in which we think about them.*”

The term “microaggressions” refers to a way of thinking about brief and commonplace indignities and slights communicated to people of color (and others). Small acts of aggression are real, so the term could be useful, but because the definition includes accidental and *unintentional* offenses, the word “aggression” is misleading. Using the lens of microaggressions may amplify the pain experienced and the conflict that ensues. (On the other hand, there is nothing “micro” about intentional acts of aggression and bigotry.)

By encouraging students to interpret the actions of others in the least generous way possible, schools that teach students about microaggressions may be encouraging students to engage in emotional reasoning and other distortions while setting themselves up for higher levels of distrust and conflict. Karith Foster offers an example of using empathy to reappraise actions that could be interpreted as microaggressions. When she interpreted those actions as innocent (albeit insensitive) misunderstandings, it led to a better outcome for everyone.

The number of efforts to “disinvite” speakers from giving talks on campus has increased in the last few years; such efforts are often justified by the claim that the speaker will cause harm to students. Students, professors, and administrators should understand the concept of anti-fragility and keep in mind Hanna Holborn Gray’s principle: “Education should not be intended to make people comfortable; it is meant to make them think.”

CHAPTER 3. The Untruth of Us Versus Them: Life is a Battle Between Good People and Evil People

The human mind evolved for living in tribes that engaged in frequent (and often violent) conflict. A variety of psychological experiments have demonstrated that our modern-day minds also readily divide the world into “us” and “them,” even on trivial or arbitrary criteria.

So what happens to a community such as a college when distinctions between groups—race, gender, and other socially significant factors—are emphasized rather than downplayed?

Politics is all about groups forming coalitions to achieve their goals. Identity politics takes many forms. Some forms, such as that practiced by Martin Luther King, Jr., and Pauli Murray, can be called *common-humanity identity politics*, because its practitioners humanize their opponents and appeal to their humanity while also applying political pressure in other ways.

Common-enemy identity politics, on the other hand, tries to unite a coalition using the psychology embedded in the Bedouin proverb “I against my brothers. I and my brothers and my cousins against the world.” It is used on the far right as well as the far left. Common-enemy identity politics, when combined with microaggression theory, produces a call-out culture in which almost anything one says or does could result in public shaming. This can engender a sense of “walking on eggshells,” and it teaches students habits of self-censorship.

Call-out cultures are detrimental to students’ education and bad for their mental health. Call-out cultures and us-versus-them thinking are incompatible with the educational and research mission of universities, which require free inquiry, dissent, evidence-based argument, and intellectual honesty.

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PART II: BAD IDEAS IN ACTION

CHAPTER 4. Intimidation and Violence

The “Milo Riot” at UC Berkeley on February 1, 2017, marked a major shift in campus protests. Violence was used successfully to stop a speaker. People were injured, and there were (as far as we can tell) no consequences for those who were violent. Some students later justified the violence as a legitimate form of “self-defense” to prevent speech they said was violence.

Hardly any students say that they themselves would use violence to shut down a speech, but two surveys conducted in late 2017 found that substantial minorities of students (20% in one survey and 30% in the other) said it was sometimes “acceptable” for *other* students to use violence to prevent a speaker from speaking on campus.

The “Unite to Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which a white nationalist killed a peaceful counter protester and injured others, further raised tensions on campus, especially as provocations from far-right groups increased in the months afterward. In the fall of 2017, the number of efforts to shut down speakers reached a record level. The idea that speech can be violence (even when it does not involve threats, harassment, or calls for violence) seemed to spread, assisted by a tendency in some circles to focus only on perceived impact, not on intent. Words that give stress or fear for members of some groups are now often regarded as a form of violence.

Speech is not violence. Treating it as such is an interpretive choice, and it is a choice that increases pain and suffering while preventing other, more effective responses, including the stoic response (cultivating non-reactivity) and the anti-fragile response suggested by Van Jones: “Put on some boots, and learn how to deal with adversity.”

CHAPTER 5. Witch Hunts

Humans are tribal creatures who readily form groups to compete with other groups. Sociologist Emile Durkheim’s work illuminates the way those groups engage in rituals—including the collective punishment of deviance—to enhance their cohesion and solidarity.

Cohesive and morally homogeneous groups are prone to “witch hunts,” particularly when they experience a threat, whether from outside or from within. Witch hunts generally have four properties: they seem to come out of nowhere; they involve charges of crimes against the collective; the offenses that lead to those charges are often trivial or fabricated; and people who know that the accused is innocent keep quiet, or in extreme cases, they join the mob.

Some of the most puzzling campus events and trends since 2015 match the profile of a witch hunt. The campus protests at Yale, Claremont McKenna, and Evergreen all began as reactions to politely worded emails, and all led to demands that the authors of the emails be fired. (Of course, the concerns that provide the context for a witch hunt may be valid, but in a witch hunt, the attendant fears are channeled in unjust and destructive ways.)

The new trend in 2017 for professors to join open letters denouncing their colleagues and demanding the retraction or condemnation of their work (as happened to Rebecca Tuvel, Amy Wax, and others) also fits this pattern. In all of these cases, colleagues of the accused were afraid to publicly stand up and defend them.

Viewpoint diversity reduces a community’s susceptibility to witch hunt. One of the most important kinds of viewpoint diversity, diversity of political thought, has declined substantially among both professors and students at American

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universities since the 1990s. These declines, combined with the rapidly escalating political polarization of the United States, may be part of the reason why the new culture of safetyism has spread so rapidly since its emergence around 2013.

PART III: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

CHAPTER 6. The Polarization Cycle

The first of six explanatory threads that will help us understand what has been changing on campus is polarization. The United States has experienced a steady increase in at least one form of polarization since the 1980s: affective (or emotional) polarization, which means that people who identify with either of the two main political parties increasingly hate and fear the other party and the people in it.

Affective polarization in the United States is roughly symmetrical, but as university students and faculty have shifted leftward during a time of rising cross-party hatred, universities have begun to receive less trust and more hostility from some conservatives and right-leaning organizations. Beginning in 2016, the number of high-profile cases of professors being hounded or harassed from the right for something they said in an interview or on social media began to increase.

Many professors say they now teach and speak more cautiously, because one slip or one simple misunderstanding could lead to vilification and even threats from a number of sources. Add to that an insidious new problem: professors are being closely watched because of their politics. Provoking uncomfortable thoughts is an essential part of a professor's role, but professors now have reason to worry that provocative educational exercises and lines of questioning could spell the end of their reputations and even careers.

This rising political polarization, accompanied by increases in racial and political provocation from the right, usually directed from off-campus to on-campus targets, is an essential part of the story of why behavior is changing on campus.

CHAPTER 7. Anxiety and Depression

The national rise in adolescent anxiety and depression that began around 2011 is our second explanatory thread. The generation born between 1995 and 2012, called iGen (or sometimes Gen Z) is very different from the Millennials, the generation that preceded it. One difference is that iGen is growing up more slowly. On average, eighteen-year-olds today have spent less time unsupervised and have hit fewer development milestones on the path to autonomy (such as getting a job or a driver's license), compared with eighteen-year-olds in previous generations.

A second difference is that iGen has far higher rates of anxiety and depression. The increases for girls and young women are generally much larger than for boys and young men. The increases do not just reflect changing definitions or standards; they show up in rising hospital admission rates of self-harm and in rising suicide rates. The suicide rate of adolescent boys is still higher than that of girls, but the suicide rate of adolescent girls has doubled since 2007.

According to Jean Twenge, the primary cause of the increase in mental illness is frequent use of smartphones and other electronic devices. Less than two hours a day seem to have no deleterious effects, but adolescents who spend several

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hours a day interacting with screens, particularly if they start in their early teens or younger, have worse mental health outcomes than do adolescents who use these devices less and who spend more time in face-to-face social interaction.

Girls may be suffering more than boys because they are more adversely affected by social comparisons (especially based on digitally enhanced beauty), by signals that they are being left out, and by relational aggression. All of these became easier to enact and harder to escape when adolescents acquired smartphones and social media.

iGen's arrival at college coincides exactly with the arrival and intensification of the culture of safetyism from 2013 to 2017. Members of iGen may be especially attracted to the overprotection offered by the culture of safetyism on many campuses because of student's higher levels of anxiety and depression. Both depression and anxiety cause changes in cognition, including a tendency to see the world as more dangerous and hostile than it really is.

CHAPTER 8. Paranoid Parenting

Paranoid parenting is our third explanatory thread. When we overprotect children, we harm them. Children are naturally anti-fragile, so overprotection makes them weaker and less resilient later on.

Children today have far more restricted childhoods, on average, than those enjoyed by their parents, who grew up in far more dangerous times and yet had many opportunities to develop their intricate anti-fragility. Compared with previous generations, younger Millennials and especially members of iGen (born in and after 1995) have been deprived of unsupervised time for play and exploration. They have missed out on many of the challenges, negative experiences, and minor risks that help children develop into strong, competent, and independent adults.

Children in the United States and other prosperous countries are safer today than any other point in history. Yet for a variety of historical reasons, fear of abduction is still very high among American parents, many of whom have come to believe that children should never be without adult supervision. When children are repeatedly led to believe that the world is dangerous and that they cannot face it alone, we should not be surprised if many of them believe it. Helicopter parenting combined with laws and social norms that make it hard to give kids unsupervised time may be having a negative impact on the mental health and resilience of young people today.

There are large social class differences in parenting styles. Families in the middle class (and above) tend to use a style that sociologist Annett Lareau calls "concerted cultivation," in contrast to the "natural growth parenting" used by families in the working class (and below).

Some college students from wealthier families may have been rendered more fragile from overparenting and over supervision. College students from poorer backgrounds are exposed to a very different set of risks. This includes potential exposure to chronic, severe adversity, which is especially detrimental to resilience when children lack caring relationships with adults who can buffer stress and help them turn adversity into growth. Paranoid parenting prepares today's children to embrace the three Great Untruths, which means that when they go to college, they are psychologically primed to join a culture of safetyism.

CHAPTER 9. The Decline of Play

The decline of unsupervised free play is our fourth explanatory thread. Children, like other mammals, need free play in order to finish the intricate wiring process of neural development. Children deprived of free play are likely to be less competent—physically and socially—as adults. They are likely to be less tolerant of risk, and more prone to anxiety disorders.

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Free play, according to Peter Gray, is “activity that is freely chosen and directed by the participants and undertaken for its own sake, not consciously pursued to achieve ends that are distinct from the activity itself.” This is the kind of play that experts say is most valuable for children, yet is also the kind of play that has declined most sharply in the lives of American children.

The decline in free play was likely driven by several factors, including an unrealistic fear of strangers and kidnapping (since the 1980s); the rising competitiveness for admission to top universities (over many decades); a rising emphasis on testing, test preparation, and homework; and a corresponding de-emphasis on physical and social skills (since the early 2000s). The rising availability of smartphones and social media interacted with these other trends, and the combination has greatly changed the way American children spend their time and the kinds of physical and social experiences that guide the intricate wiring process of neural development.

Free play helps children develop the skills of cooperation and dispute resolution that are closely related to the “art of association” upon which democracies depend. When citizens are not skilled in this art, they are less able to work out the ordinary conflicts of daily life. They will more frequently call for authorities to apply coercive force to their opponents. They will be more likely to welcome the bureaucracy of safetyism.

CHAPTER 10. The Bureaucracy of Safetyism

The growth of campus bureaucracy and the expansion of its protective mission is our fifth explanatory thread. Administrators generally have good intentions as they are trying to protect the university and its students. Still, good intentions can sometimes lead to policies that are bad for students. At Northern Michigan University, a policy that we assume was designed to protect the university from liability led to inhumane treatment of students seeking therapy.

In response to a variety of factors, including federal mandates and the risk of lawsuits, the number of campus administrators has grown more rapidly than the number of professors, and professors have gradually come to play a smaller role in the administration of universities. The result has been a trend toward “corporatization.”

At the same time, market pressures, along with an increasingly consumerist mentality about higher education, have encouraged universities to compete on the basis of the amenities they offer, leading them to think of students as customers whom they must please.

Campus administrators must juggle many responsibilities and protect the university from many kinds of liabilities, so they tend to adopt a “better safe than sorry” (or “CYA”) approach to issuing new regulations. The proliferation of regulations over time conveys a sense of imminent danger even when there is little or no real threat. In this way, administrators model multiple cognitive distortions, promote the Untruth of Fragility, and contribute to the culture of safetyism.

Some of the regulations promulgated by administrators restrict freedom of speech, often with highly subjective definitions of key concepts. These rules contribute to an attitude on campus that chills speech, in part by suggesting that freedom of speech can or should be restricted because of some students’ emotional discomfort. This teaches catastrophizing and mind reading (among other cognitive distortions) and promotes the Untruth of Emotional Reasoning.

One recent administrative innovation is the creation of “Bias Response Lines” and “Bias Response Teams,” which make it easy for members of a campus community to report to one another anonymously for “bias.” This “feel something,

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say something” approach is likely to erode trust within a community. It may also make professors less willing to try innovative or provocative teaching methods; they, too, may develop a CYA approach.

More generally, efforts to protect students by creating bureaucratic means of resolving problems and conflicts can have the unintended consequence of fostering moral dependence, which may reduce students’ ability to resolve conflicts independently both during and after college.

CHAPTER 11. The Quest for Justice

Political events in the years from 2012 to 2018 have been as emotionally powerful as any since the late 1960s. Today’s college students and student protestors are responding to these events with a powerful commitment to social justice activism. This is our sixth and final explanatory thread.

People’s ordinary, everyday, intuitive notions of justice include two major types: distributive justice (the perception that people are getting what is deserved) and procedural justice (the perception that the process by which things are distributed and rules are enforced is fair and trustworthy).

The most common way that people think about distributive justice is captured by equity theory, which states that things are perceived to be fair when the ratio of outcomes to inputs is equal for all participants.

Procedural justice is about how decisions are being made, and is also about how people are treated along the way, as procedures unfold.

Social justice is a central concept in campus life today, and it takes a variety of forms. When social justice efforts are fully consistent with both distributive and procedural justice, we call it *proportional-procedural social justice*. Such efforts generally aim to remove barriers to equality of opportunity and also to ensure that everyone is treated with dignity.

When social justice efforts aim to achieve equality of *outcomes* by group, and when social justice activists are willing to violate distributive or procedural fairness for some individuals along the way, these efforts violate many people’s sense of intuitive justice. We call this *equal-outcome social justice*.

Correlation does not imply causation. Yet in many discussions in universities these days, the correlation of a demographic trait or identity group membership with an outcome gap is taken as evidence that discrimination (structural or individual) *caused* the outcome gap. Sometimes it did, sometimes it didn’t, but if people can’t raise alternative possible causal explanations without eliciting negative consequences, then the community is unlikely to arrive at an accurate understanding of the problem. Not understanding the true nature of a problem means there is little chance of solving it.

PART IV: WISING UP

CHAPTER 12. Wiser Kids

Something is going badly wrong for American teenagers, as we can see in the statistics on depression, anxiety, and suicide. Something is going very wrong on many college campuses, as we can see in the growth of the call-out culture,

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in the rise of efforts to disinvite or shout down visiting speakers, and in changing norms about speech, including a recent tendency to evaluate speech in terms of safety and danger. This new culture of safetyism and vindictive protectiveness is bad for students and bad for universities. What can we do to change course?

Prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child. Assume that your kids are more capable this month than they were last month. Let your kids take more small risks, and let them learn from getting some bumps and bruises. Children need opportunities to “dose themselves” with risk. Visit LetGrow.org. Encourage your children to walk or ride bicycles to and from school. Help your kids find a community of kids in the neighborhood from families that share your commitment to avoid overprotection. Send your children to an overnight summer camp in the woods for a few weeks without devices. Encourage your children to engage in “productive disagreement.”

Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own thoughts, unguarded. Teach children “cognitive behavioral techniques” because the intellectual habits it teaches are good for everyone. Teach children mindfulness. Children and teens who engage in mindfulness practices are better able to calm themselves and be more “present.”

The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. Give people the benefit of the doubt. Use the “principle of charity.” Practice the virtue of “intellectual humility,” recognizing that our reasoning is so flawed, so prone to bias, that we can rarely be certain that we are right. Look very carefully at how your school handles identity politics. If you are concerned that the school is leading students to embrace the Untruth of Us Versus Them, and you are a parent, express your concerns to the principal.

Help schools to oppose the Great Untruths. Homework in the early grades should be minimal, and not intrude on playtime or family time. Give more recess with less supervision. Discourage the use of the word “safe” or “safety” for anything other than physical safety. Have a “no devices” policy. Cultivate intellectual virtues. Teach debate and offer debate club. Assign reading and coursework that promotes reasoned discussion.

Limit and refine device time. Place clear limits on device time. Pay as much attention to what children are doing as you do to how much time they spend doing it. Protect your child’s sleep.

Support a new national norm: High school graduates taking a year off after high school—a “gap year”—for service or work before college.

CHAPTER 13. Wiser Universities

Aristotle often evaluated a thing with respect to its “telos”—it’s purpose, end, or goal. What is the telos of a university? The most obvious answer is “truth,” or a close relative of truth, “knowledge.”

If the telos of a university is truth, then a university that fails to add to humanity’s growing body of knowledge, or that fails to transmit the best of that knowledge to its students, is not a good university. For those who want to attend, teach at, or lead universities of the sort where the telos is truth, we have the following advice.

Entwine your identity with freedom of inquiry. University presidents must make it clear that nobody has the right to prevent a fellow member of the community from attending or hearing a lecture. Do not allow the “heckler’s veto.” Establish a practice of not responding to public outrage. Endorse the Chicago Statement.

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Pick the best mix of people for the mission. Admit students who are older and can show evidence of their ability to live independently. Admit more students who have attended schools that teach the “intellectual virtues.” Include “viewpoint diversity” in diversity policies, although this does not require equal or proportionate representation of all views. The goal is to avoid political uniformity and orthodoxy.

Orient and educate for productive disagreement. Explicitly reject the Untruth of Fragility—that *what doesn't kill you makes you weaker*. Explicitly reject the Untruth of Emotional Reasoning—*always trust your feelings*. Explicitly reject the Untruth of Us versus Them—that *life is a battle between good people and evil people*.

Draw a larger circle around the community. Foster school spirit and forge a common identity. Protect the physical safety of students and professors from extremists. Host civil, cross-partisan events for students to demonstrate the value of exposure to political diversity.

CONCLUSION. Wiser Societies

This is a book about wisdom and its opposite. It is a book about three psychological principles and about what happens to young people when parents and educators—acting with the best intentions—implement policies that are inconsistent with those principles.

Principle: Young people are anti-fragile.

Wisdom: Prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child.

Great Untruth: What doesn't kill you makes you weaker.

Principle: We are all prone to emotional reasoning and confirmation bias.

Wisdom: Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own thoughts, unguarded. Once mastered, no one can help you as much, not even your father or your mother.

Great Untruth: Always trust your feelings.

Principle: We are all prone to dichotomous thinking and tribalism.

Wisdom: The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

Great Untruth: Life is a battle between good people and evil people.

We predict things will improve, and the change may happen quite suddenly at some point in the next few years. The major social media companies are taking steps to reduce harassment. More parents are encouraging their kids to play outside, with one another, and without adult supervision. More scholars are writing about the ways emphasizing racial identity leads to bad outcomes in a multiracial society.

As far as we can tell, most university presidents reject the culture of safetyism. They know it is bad for students and bad for free inquiry. We believe most high school and college students despise call-out culture and would prefer to be at a school that had little of it. Most students are not fragile, they are not “snowflakes,” and they are not afraid of ideas.

If we can educate the next generation more wisely, they will be stronger, richer, more virtuous, and even safer.