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Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces: Diversity and Free Expression in Education

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*Safe spaces, brave spaces:
Diversity and free expression in education*

J. Palfrey;
Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press

Reviewed by Eli Casteel

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John Palfrey's *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces* is a helpful read in our current environment, providing a reasonable and brief survey of the present landscape of diversity and free expression in the academy. The book at its best clearly marries the two ideas of diversity and free expression and, at its less optimal moments, provides helpful background information. Palfrey's writing style makes the book enjoyable to read as he weaves in his knowledge of the law to succinctly make his point. *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces* will trigger many ideas, provide helpful frameworks, and generate ample conversation starters for most student affairs educators and professionals.

The driving thesis throughout the book *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces* is diversity and free expression ought to exist together (Palfrey, 2017). In addition to the normative coupling of free expression and diversity, the book explores the limits of tolerance within the framework of both private and public university settings and within a democratic society. As a legal scholar, Palfrey, examines legal cases and applies them to the topics of diversity, free expression, hate speech, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly, and concludes by examining the

importance of these democratic principles. During his examination of these democratic principles, Palfrey consistently ties in higher education and the function of a democratic society. Palfrey starts the book off by charitably analyzing five flashpoints on college campuses: safe spaces, trigger warnings, microaggressions, speakers, and the renaming of buildings.

Palfrey is fair in his brief overview of student activism in higher education. He places each of the five flashpoints within the context of learning, which seems apt considering the controversies take place on college campuses. First, Palfrey removes the dichotomy of a safe space and a brave space and instead articulates a spectrum with safe spaces on one end and brave spaces on the other. The purpose of the continuum is twofold: It illustrates, first, how speech becomes less protected as it moves toward brave spaces, and second, how students need varying levels of safe and brave spaces in order to engage in meaningful learning. Next, he suggests that professors who use trigger warnings are not being overly sensitive, but are instead being polite. Third, Palfrey acknowledges microaggressions and how they are compounded by multiple identities of difference or the intersectionality of identities, like being both black and a woman. However, he—very importantly—goes on to resituate the conversation of microaggressions within the context of implicit bias. Palfrey then quickly touches on the flashpoint of disinviting speakers, essentially stating disinviting speakers is counter to both free expression and diversity. Finally, he moves onto the topic of renaming buildings, which he sees as an opportunity to raise the level of conversation on campuses.

The next two chapters wrestle with the case for diversity and free expression. Logically, he starts with the case for diversity because without diversity there would be no need for freedom of expression. Palfrey lays out a series of different arguments for diversity often using the Supreme Court as a testifying witness for the case of diversity. Additionally, he argues that the current climate and trends within the United States signals an ever more pressing need for diversity within the academy. According to Palfrey, free expression is an important concept in the development of autonomy as well as a vibrant and healthy pluralistic democracy, which needs an environment where ideas can be challenged, exchanged, and transformed. Throughout his chapter on free expression, he references the first amendment and how it was a necessary right for a variety of social justices activists like abolitionists, women's suffragists, and civil

rights leaders. The goal of these examples is to highlight the thesis of free expression and diversity coexisting and working together.

The rest of the book examines the limits of the first amendment by looking at hate speech, the freedom of the press, and the freedom of assembly. Palfrey makes two helpful arguments in the hate speech chapter. First he uses his legal expertise to reveal the difference in standards concerning the first amendment between public and private institutions. Second, he shows there is a limit to the first amendment, which he suggests is a combination of time, place, and context coupled with “fighting words” before discussing the critical role the free press plays in informing and garnering trust within the public. The book concludes with an argument in support of why free expression and diversity matter: They inform our conceptions of tolerance, which is needed for a pluralistic democracy to flourish.

For Christians, and specifically for those of us working in Christian higher education, the book prompts two questions: How do Christians fit within a pluralistic democracy, and theologically what are the implications of tolerance? The essence of the first question explores the need for diversity. Specifically, how does the Christian narrative fit within the diverse tapestry of a pluralistic society, and how are we preparing students for such contexts? The second question deals with how we ought to engage or express ourselves. *Safe Spaces Brave Spaces* does a good job of starting the conversation, and the text provides some helpful background information about how the legal system has supported diversity and free expression and their necessity in promoting a democratic society. However, the book does little in guiding or even suggesting how to go about teaching or living out these principles.

The discussion of tolerance seems to fall short of how most Christians would articulate their obligation within a pluralistic democracy. The tolerance articulated by Palfrey seems to be a classical rendition of the silver rule: Do not do unto others as you would not want done to you. This perspective of tolerance is one of creating space between individual actors. This usage of the silver rule operates within an assumed individualistic viewpoint, which is found throughout *Safe Spaces Brave Spaces*.

Palfrey directly supports the development of autonomy in his chapter on free expression. It is unclear how his formulation of an argument for free expression within the framework of tolerance would capture a collectivist worldview. The book seems to consistently exist in the

tension of espousing pluralism, but as a means for autonomy, which is not a universally held conception of the good life. What happens when a person's idea of the good life is that everyone ought to live a life congruent with his or her tribe, community, or faith tradition? Christianity, specifically, would still probably support the idea that it has a convicted sense of how humans should collectively act to flourish. From a Christian perspective, tolerance then seems like a low bar for society to live by. Perhaps for Christians, remaining in fellowship takes priority over tolerance.

In the conclusion, *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces* does not return to its original conception of brave spaces and safe spaces. This lack of looping back to the beginning of the book is unfortunate because the two spaces, brave and safe, capture much of the pluralistic democratic values put forth by Palfrey. Safe spaces represent the individual's subjective pursuit of truth and brave spaces are the public squares where the universal truths can be discussed, shared, and tested. Both the safe and the brave spaces assist in developing diversity and autonomy. Overall, for higher education professionals working at any institution, the book is a sensible read, touching on many of today's issues. *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces* is an exploration of how a democratic or academic community balances the pursuit of truth, while valuing both the individual and collective experiences through the joint understanding of free expression and diversity as interlocutors in the discourse of truth.

Eli Casteel will complete his Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development from Taylor University in May 2018.