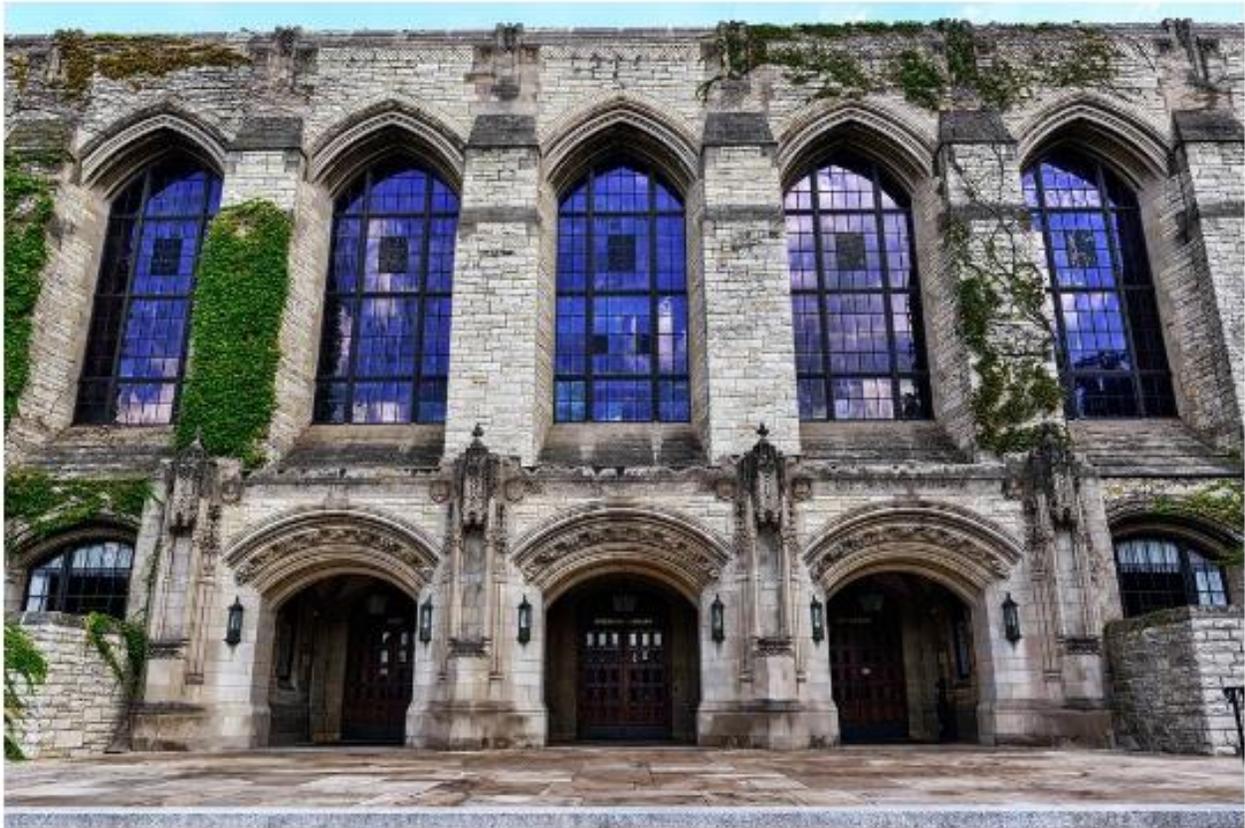


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Why Northwestern President Morton Schapiro Favors Safe Spaces

It isn't about coddling students. It's about creating an environment for learning



Northwestern's president believes people need to feel safe to voluntarily engage in uncomfortable learning. PHOTO: STEVE GEER/GETTY IMAGES

By *Douglas Belkin*

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97 COMMENTS

The presidents of the two academic powerhouses on either end of Chicago's Lake Shore Drive have very different perspectives on a host of campus issues that have made headlines this year: free speech, safe spaces and microaggressions.

Last year the administration of University of Chicago President Robert Zimmer sent incoming freshmen a letter telling them to expect discomfort—not safe spaces—on his campus.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-northwestern-president-morton-schapiro-favors-safe-spaces-1494987120>

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Northwestern President Morton Schapiro takes a gentler approach.

He believes that because learning is frequently uncomfortable, students need safe spaces—which for him means places where people who share an identity can retreat, relax and recoup.

That might mean sharing a meal with students who are all of the same color or religion or watching a movie in a house designated for students from a certain background.

Microaggressions—a catchall term describing small acts of bias, intentional or not—are real, he believes. They leave scars. At least they have on him, he said in a recent interview. Edited excerpts follow

WSJ: *You've said that you remember every microaggression you've ever heard. Can you provide an example—and tell me how it has affected your understanding of why safe spaces are important?*

MR. SCHAPIRO: I was at a university in a very high-level position. It was a university that wasn't known for having a lot of leaders who are Jews. We were at a major event. It was before a big football game. The marching band was performing. One of the wives of one of the leaders of this place turned to me and she said, "Morty, you must really enjoy this music." I looked at her and said, "Yeah." I must have had a puzzled look on my face. What was it about me that you would think I was particularly loving the marching band? She said, "Because your people are such musical people."



MORTON SCHAPIRO | 'I'm with students all the time. I see what they struggle with.' PHOTO: DANIEL ACKER/BLOOMBERG NEWS

I thought, did I just hear that? It all of a sudden occurred to me I was the Jew. Even though I was near the top of the administration, at least some people just thought of me as a Jew.

People say microaggressions don't exist, but that just opened my eyes. I was taking for granted that I was one of the leaders of this place, and I was there for whatever academic

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accomplishments I had. But the old establishment thought of me as the Jew. Your people are such a musical people. Not only is that insulting, but that's about the stupidest statement I've ever heard.

WSJ: *People can be stupid and insensitive everywhere. But the military and large corporations exist without safe spaces. Why are they necessary on college campuses?*

MR. SCHAPIRO: I've never been in the military, so I don't know. But I've been on corporate boards for 25 years. I know a little bit about that. At many levels of a hierarchy, you don't have the same diversity, or backgrounds, rural and urban and international, that you have on college campuses. So, I think we're trying to do something that's pretty unusual on our campuses. Frankly, we struggle how to do it right.

Now, it is very tempting to take an absolutist view that we can never coddle our students. We have to prepare them for the world. We never do anything that undermines the brilliance of the First Amendment. That isn't the real world on college campuses. You want them to feel safe and protected so that they voluntarily engage in uncomfortable learning. That prepares them for the world.

You want to protect the First Amendment, obviously, but it isn't absolute. People reduce it to slogans or free speech at all costs. I've been a president 17 years and an educator—this is the 38th consecutive year that I've taught. I see it. I eat in the dorms. I'm with the students all the time. I see what they struggle with. These are tough issues, and to just say, "My campus doesn't do safe spaces".... Maybe some people take comfort in that, but I don't. My job as a leader is to draw that line.

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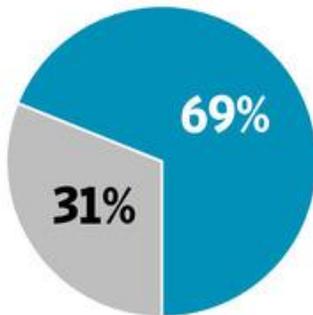
Speech Police

Percentage of college students who think colleges and universities should or shouldn't be able to restrict the following types of speech or expression on campus:

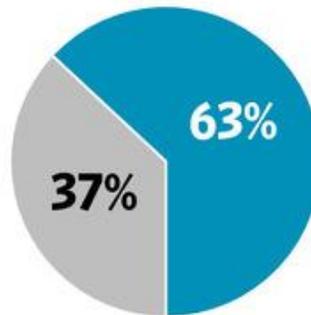
■ **Able to restrict**

■ **Not able to restrict**

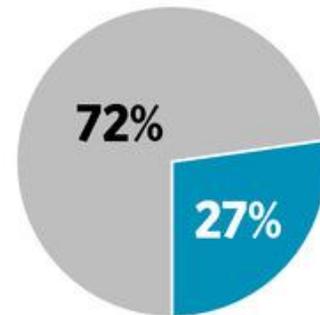
Using slurs and other language that is intentionally offensive to certain groups



Wearing costumes that stereotype certain racial or ethnic groups



Expressing political views that are upsetting or offensive to certain groups



Source: Knight Foundation, from a Gallup telephone survey of 3,072 college students conducted Feb. 29-March 15, 2016; margin of error: +/-3 percentage points

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WSJ: *Can you give me an example of drawing that line?*

MR. SCHAPIRO: It was Holocaust Remembrance Week. I was president of Williams. There were some very in-your-face posters and pictures of Auschwitz. This lady decides to redo them [with a "Happy Birthday Hitler" message] and replace the Jewish star with a symbol for cannabis. It was absolutely disgraceful. I'm coming back from synagogue, and I'm seeing this. I'm just horrified.

I'm not a lawyer, but I have some friends who are, and I asked, "What do I do? This is freedom of speech?" One of them asked a very good question: "When she put up these posters, did she say, 'I'm going to figure out where the Jews are, the blacks are, the gays are, anybody with

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disabilities, people targeted by the Nazis”? Because if she did that, then she put these disgraceful posters on their doors, that isn’t free speech. That’s assault.”

So, I asked, where were they put up? Were they put up in common rooms? Or were they targeted to blacks, Jews, and gays? It was the former.

We called everyone in. We said, “What you did was disgusting, but we’re going to protect you, because you had every right to do it.”

A lot of people were furious.

So, it is funny that I’ve been seen as this politically correct person. I believe in the Constitution. I really do. But I also love safe spaces because people, once they get confidence, move out of them.

Strength to engage

WSJ: *Isn’t part of your school’s mission to encourage students to find safety in diversity?*

MR. SCHAPIRO: People aren’t voluntarily going to engage in uncomfortable learning unless there’s someplace where they feel safe. It’s as simple as that.

I have two synagogues, one Friday night, one Saturday morning. I belong to a golf club. I know that when I’m out playing golf maybe the course isn’t safe, because I’m such a bad golfer, but it is a safe space for me. Nobody comes up to me and says, “Hey, idiot, you’re rejecting my granddaughter.” They just leave me alone when I play golf.

So, I have safe spaces. I think a lot of people have safe spaces, but they just don’t recognize them in their lives. To think that 18-year-olds don’t deserve some place they can go. Dorms aren’t safe spaces. They’re mixed up with roommates they often don’t like. Dining halls aren’t safe spaces. Classrooms aren’t safe spaces.

I don’t feel coddled because I have a golf club and two synagogues. I feel like it gives me the strength to engage with the world.

WSJ: *Why do you think there is so much heat around this question now?*

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MR. SCHAPIRO: I've spent a fair amount of time in Washington. I've never seen it like it is now. It's scary out there. It's all polarized. It isn't what it used to be, which is, I respect you. You just have a different view. Now it is like, who are you?

WSJ: *Northwestern has had two high-profile professors charge that the school curtails free speech to protect students. The student government recently passed a resolution to protect free speech on campus because they are worried the school will develop a reputation as a place where it isn't respected. Has the pendulum swung too far? Does the school need a course correction?*

MR. SCHAPIRO: Again, I will just say that if you shut down freedom of speech, you better have a really good reason. These Midwest people, there's a certain humility and civility and a lack of entitlement here. I think the dialogue works very well. We have programs for faculty, staff and could be for students if they engage with one another. It generally works well. I think if you shut down anything, you better be really sure that you have a moral and legal justification to do it. That's my view.

WSJ: *There were recent incidents at Middlebury and Berkeley, preventing Charles Murray and Milo Yiannopoulos from speaking. Would you be comfortable having either man speak at Northwestern?*

MR. SCHAPIRO: You don't really protect a community if you shut down dialogue. There's a legal framework in which we operate. But it isn't absolute. It would be on a case-by-case basis. You get the facts. A lot of people advise you. But at the end of the day, I'm the president. It's my responsibility. If I make the right call, good. If I make the wrong call, then maybe I'll do a better job next time. But again, the Constitution and Bill of Rights have served this country extremely well, and you better have a really good reason to interfere with freedom of speech.

WSJ: What has been the public reaction to your views?

MR. SCHAPIRO: It's just an amazing number of emails that are really nasty. They send some death threats. I get them pretty regularly. I send them to the police.

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