Understanding the Uses of Safe Space to Inform Higher Education Policy

By:
Cecile H. Sam, PhD

USC Rossier
Pullias Center for Higher Education

Author

Cecile H. Sam, PhD is a qualitative researcher who focuses on the nexus of ethics, faculty work, and leadership in K-20 contexts. Cecile is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Services and Leadership at Rowan University

Cecile received her PhD in 2011 at the USC Roosier School of Education and was a research assistant at the Pullias Center for Higher Education. She is a recipient of an inaugural **Pullias Center Equity Alumni Award**. This is a report from her research for this award.

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Recommended citation for this report: Sam, C.H. (2021). *Understanding the uses of safe space to inform higher education policy.* University of Southern California, Pullias Center for Higher Education.

An Introduction

In 2018, the University of Utah hosted an art installation titled *Safe Space for Stressed Out Students Otherwise Known as the Cry Closet*, created by student Nemo Miller.[1] This art installation was a stand-alone closet placed in the library, lined with soft material and stocked with stuffed animals. Students could use the installation if they needed a place to have a moment away from the stress of studying for finals. This art piece was shared broadly over social media with some people responding positively to the work. However, not everyone had a similar reaction. Rather than viewing it as student art, some people thought that the closet was a new version of a university-sponsored "safe space" program, and one in myriad examples of higher education institutions of indoctrinating students with "liberal" ideologies.

The reactions in this example illustrate how political and contentious the idea of safe space can be to the general public. According to a recent Pew (2018) research survey, higher education as an institution has experienced growing skepticism and flagging support from the general public.[2] Part of that may be due to the perception that higher education institutions shelter or infantilize students via safe spaces.

While the term safe space is contentious (Harpalani, 2017), it actually represents several different ideas and applications. One of the challenges of safe space as a concept is that people do not always recognize that there are various ways to understand and use the term, and so interpretation and implementation of safe space policies and practices can also look very different and serve different purposes.

Scope of the Problem

When looking at how colleges and universities implement safe space policy, it is key to note that not all the policies are explicit (i.e., *de jure*), such as literal Safe Space/Safe Zone programming or classroom syllabus policy. Rather, there are also de facto policies that are created through implicit means as a result of respective institutional culture, such as how institutions support student protests, public statements from leadership, or expectations of student behavior. When institutions and stakeholders invoke either *de jure* or *de facto* safe space policies without a clear articulation of what is meant by safe space, the result can be a co-opting or dilution of that policy. We can see examples from white nationalist leaders like Richard Spencer calling for safe spaces to speak at Michigan State University.[3] Similarly, when the delineations and distinctions of safe spaces are left up to individual interpretation, people already disinclined to support safe spaces may interpret the idea in an uncharitable light. For those people who value safe spaces and see

1 Bird, G. (2018, April 26). "Cry Closet" installed for finals at University of Utah. *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/04/26/cry-closet-installed-finals-university-utah#:~:text=The%20installation%2C%20called%20Safe%20Place,use%20the%20hashtag%20%23cryclosetuofu%20if

2 Parker, K. (2020). *The growing partisan divide in views of higher education*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/08/19/the-growing-partisan-divide-in-views-of-higher-education-2/

3 Karoub, J. (2017, August 17). Michigan State University rejects while nationalist event. *AP News*. https://apnews.com/article/c8944b40fac84739bce6c5b915551aad

In short, how people define what is safe space and who needs safe space becomes important especially as institutions create and implement such policies. However, when no definition of safe space is provided, for good or ill, people will provide their own definitions to fill that gap.

them as key to democratizing education, facilitating student growth, and supporting BIPOC/LGBTQIA students and faculty, both of these outcomes can be counterproductive.

In short, how people define what is safe space and who needs safe space becomes important especially as institutions create and implement such policies. However, when no definition of safe space is provided, for good or ill, people will provide their own definitions to fill that gap.

How this Brief can Inform the Policy Process

This brief is designed to give policymakers a broader perspective on safe spaces and the different ways that people have used the term in a higher education context. Rather than advocating for one definition or interpretation, this brief will present a short history of the origins of safe space and recent higher education controversies. It will also present the different ways people have used or enacted the idea of safe space. For additional context, hyperlinks to media sources reporting on events are provided in corresponding footnotes.

This brief functions with the premise that policy is political (Stone, 2012). Rather than being a rational process of reasoned cost-benefit analysis, policy decisions are a contest of values and worldviews (Stone, 2012). It also means that policy is subject to the interpretation of the policymaker and those persons implementing the policy. Through recognition that there may be different interpretations and the clarity of usage, policymakers may be able to craft or reclaim policies on safe space that better serve their intentions and purposes.

History of Safe Space

There are some disagreements over the origins of the term safe space. The more commonly accepted history is presented by Kenny (2001) who proposed that safe spaces were connected to the womens' movement and the LGBTQ community in the 1960's and 70's. These spaces were defined as places where these groups could go to be free from judgement and harassment and find a sense of community. This coincided with campus protests at the time, and eventually made its way onto college campuses, first with the focus of LGBTQ rights and later extended to other marginalized groups such as BIPOC students (Harpalani, 2017). However, Bell (2015) attributed the term to psychologist Kurk Lewin, who used the idea in the 1940's for a corporate leadership training activity, where members of a group could give unvarnished feedback to one another.

Regardless of the origin, in the 1990's the idea of safe space made its way into the academic literature (Harpalani,

2017). Despite the long history of safe space on campus and in research, the public response to safe space is a relatively recent occurrence. Scholars Lukianoff and Haidt (2017) argue that the first time "safe space in an academic sense" entered American mainstream dialogue was in 2015 following an essay written by Judith Shulevitz for *The New York Times* (p. 39).[4] This essay problematized safe spaces on campus and shared it with a larger public audience. It helped introduce safe spaces into part of the political lexicon to challenge the values and purpose of higher education.

Synopsis of Methodology

This brief stems from a research project involving a qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) of over 500 articles referencing safe space published in two higher education news sources—*The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*—between December 1995 and December 2020. For this project, each time an article used the term safe space, the term was labeled based on definition/usage, context, speaker/author, and date. The information was then categorized based on similarities or conflicts with one another to better understand the different ways that people define and enact safe space within a higher education context.

Recent Controversies

Over the last 25 years there have been events reported in the news where the ideas of safe space have sparked controversies and discussion, usually focused on the values of academic freedom and social justice. This brief will highlight four of the more recent events, among the many, to give the reader a sense of the milieu shaping the conversations about the role safe space plays on campuses. These events also had a surrounding constellation of media-reported activity at the time and afterwards.

Event One: November 2015, University of Missouri

Over In the wake of racist incidents both on and off campus and the lack of response from University of Missouri leadership, students organized protests—including the mobilization of students by a group called Concerned Student 1950, a hunger strike, and football player boycott. Eventually these protests played a role in the resignation of President Tim Wolfe . During this time, two notable calls for safe space occurred which helps illustrate the different ways that people use and understand the term safe space. The first incident was early on during the protests, journalists met signs that said "No Media, Safe Space." [5] In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, [6] graduate student Jonathan Butler explained the reasoning behind this ban:

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4 Shulevitz, J. (2015, March 21). In college and hiding from scary ideas. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/opinion/sunday/judith-shulevitz-hiding-from-scary-ideas.html

5 Logue, J. (2015, November 11). Journalists as the enemy. *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/11/11/video-shows-mizzou-student-press-clash-protesters

6 Pearce, M. (2015, November 10). Hunger striker gives credit to fellow activists fighting racism at University of Missouri. *The Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-missouri-hunger-striker-20151110-story.html

> We were having someone difficult dialogues there, talking about race. That is a very sensitive space to be in and be vulnerable in. It was necessary to keep that space very healthy, a very open space for dialogue, versus it being a place where people are going to cover a story, exoticize people who are going through pain and struggle.

One of the more public conflicts was between a photojournalist and Mizzou student, Tim Tai, and protestors trying to keep him out of the public area. In a video of the incident, a faculty member can be seen calling for "muscle" to move journalists out of the area. In the wake of the event, the group Concerned Student 1950 removed the signs and replaced them with signs welcoming the media.

The second incident was a casual reference to safe space, when then President Wolfe issued a call to have discussions about student concerns, "we want to find the best way to get everyone around the table and create the safe space for a meaningful conversation that promotes change." [7] Wolfe's usage spoke more to a convening of people, rather than the separation from people, and illustrates the different ways the term can be used.

Event Two: August 2016, University of Chicago

In Fall 2016 in a letter to incoming students,[8] the Dean of Students John Ellison wrote,

> Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called trigger warnings, we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial and we do not condone the creation of intellectual safe spaces where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.

In this letter, Dean Ellison equated safe space with intellectual sheltering. This letter sparked a response from both supporters and detractors. On the one side, there were people lauding the dean for his support of academic freedom, while other people felt that it alienated students and privileged others. In one response, over 150 faculty members signed an open letter in the student newspaper not to support safe spaces per se, but argued that students have a right to request safe spaces and that there were more nuances to the idea.[9]

Event Three: July 2019 (with prior events in 2015, 2017), University of California, San Diego (UCSD)

In 2015, a student satire publication at UCSD, *The Koala*, published an article titled "UCSD Unveils New Dangerous Space on Campus", mocking campus safe spaces and using derogatory slurs and racial epithets in the article.[10] One

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7 Thomason, A. (2015, November 8). U. of Missouri Chief resists calls to resign after football team joins protest of racism. The Chronicle of Higher Education. https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/u-of-missouri-chief-resists-calls-to-resign-after-football-team-joins-protest-of-racism

8 Jaschik, S. (2016, August 25). U Chicago to freshmen: Don't expect safe spaces. *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/08/25/u-chicago-warns-incoming-students-not-expect-safe-spaces-or-trigger-warnings

9 Letter to the Editor. (2016, September 13). Letter: Faculty respond to Ellison with a letter of their own. *The Chicago Maroon*. https://www.chicagomaroon.com/article/2016/9/13/letter-faculty-respond-ellison-letter/

10 Wexler, E. (2016, June 7). ACLU sues UC San Diego on student publication. *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2016/06/07/aclu-sues-uc-san-diego-student-publication

of the repercussions was UCSD's student government removing all of the publication's funding for all media for the remainder of the 2015-16 academic year, which relegated *The Koala* to an online-only medium. With representation from the American Civil Liberties Union, the publication filed a lawsuit, which a federal judge dismissed in 2017. *The Koala* appealed, with additional support from groups such as the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, and the Student Press Law Center. In 2019, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit reinstated the lawsuit, allowing it to move forward.[11] The argument being that freedom of press should not be limited to only publications that institutions deem appropriate or tasteful.

Event Four: March 2020, United States

When talking about safe spaces in higher education policy and practices, this brief would be remiss to not discuss the COVID-19 pandemic. Though safe space as a singular term was used less frequently in the data, the idea of safety on campus very much dominated the media conversation. The physical safety of students and employees at colleges and universities was the major issue at hand as most institutions made decisions to close campuses and move to online formats, then later tried to plan for re-opening in the fall.[12] With the nascent use of virtual meeting platforms, "Zoombombing" became a familiar term. Zoombombing is "where digital disruptors join online meetings and spew hateful comments, play loud music, and share lewd content."[13] This threatened the psychological safety in these virtual classroom and events. With these events online platforms and institutions developed security measures and policies to try to ensure a safer online environment.

Safe Spaces: Not just for Students

To understand safe space, one question that arises is "who is this safe space for?" Often when people use the term "safe space," it is in reference to the student population and their experiences on campus. This experience ranges from the classroom to residential halls, and even moves to extracurricular activities, both sponsored and not sponsored by the institution. Safe spaces were not limited to minoritized student populations, rather many instances included all students broadly. However, people also use the term safe space as it applies to what faculty and administrators need to carry on their work at the institution. Activities such as mentorship, policy implementation, research, and teaching require some element of safety to encourage growth and initiative.

In its broadest usage, safe spaces are for everyone housed within the institution—these are campuses where people can feel secure enough to conduct their daily business with relative safety. United States federal policies like Title IX reflect the idea of a safe space where people should be able to be on a campus free of sexual harassment and

11 Lederman, D. (2019, July 25). Even "offensive" publications have free press rights. *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/07/25/appeals-court-says-university-may-have-violated-rights-repugnant-humor-publication

12 Chronicle Staff (2020, March 3). The Coronavirus is upending higher ed. Here are the latest developments. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-coronavirus-is-upending-higher-ed-here-are-the-latest-developments/

13 McKenzie, L. (2021, February 17). Zoombombing often an "inside job." *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/02/17/college-zoombombing-incidents-often-incited-students

discrimination. Safe spaces, especially in terms of physical safety, is also an important idea when focused on higher education institutions in conflict countries or places where academic freedom is not a recognized right.

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Use of Safe Space

As noted above, one of the challenges of safe space is the myriad ways that people interpret or use the term. At times the uses can be paradoxical—such as using safe spaces to foster student development. On the one hand, supporters frame safe spaces as necessary for students to grow and learn, and on the other hand, opponents frame it as a practice that prevents students from intellectually developing. Stakeholders can view these spaces as expansive and/or limiting. Safe spaces can be expansive by removing barriers and threats to allow for open dialogue, authentic being, and promoting inclusivity. They can also be limiting by keeping some activities or people out of a particular space, declaring some ideas as verboten, or promoting exclusivity. A tension between both can be found in many uses.

The following section describes the different ways people use safe spaces. Though the uses are presented separately, they are not exclusive. As people use and enact the term, they may imbue a combination of meanings within their understanding. Similarly, with the different uses of safe space we can see how people can be supportive or unsupportive based on how they understand the term.

Safe Space as an Explicit Program

The most straightforward use of safe space is the application of a specifically titled program. These programs and training sessions labeled as "Safe Space" or "Safe Zone" are usually university-sponsored functions offered to students, faculty, or staff. Some of the more commonly used programs focus on inclusivity for members of the LGBTQIA community, and may either be created with in-house expertise, or in partnership with external organizations such as Campus Pride or the Human Rights Campaign. There are also university-sponsored policies such as resident housing allocations for respective populations of students.

Safe Spaces for Risk-taking

From faculty research to teaching and learning in classrooms, some uses of safe space involve being a place for people to take intellectual risks with relatively low stakes. The underlying reasoning is that people would be less willing to experiment, explore ideas, or innovate if the costs for making mistakes are too high. In this space there is a freedom to make mistakes in the hopes of improvement. This space is not limited to student learning or faculty work, it can also extend to the institutions of higher education themselves where "Perhaps there needs to be some formally recognized 'safe space' within which institutions can innovate in the form of new approaches, new delivery modes and new pedagogy without putting their standing within the higher education community at risk."[14]

14 Lederman, D. (2005, September 21). What should the U.S. Commission do? *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/

Safe Space as a Sanctuary

The more common use of safe space (e.g., as presented to the general public) appears to be safe space as a protected space. In this space, members have an expectation to be protected from two harms. The first is physical harm. To some extent, most stakeholders at U.S. universities and colleges expect some modicum of physical safety, but recent designations of sanctuary institutions and safe spaces highlight an additional level. The second is an expectation of protection from abuse and psychological harm. These places would be free of harassment, recrimination, discrimination where people could be vulnerable with others. Though not always the case, confidentiality can be connected to the use of safe space as a sanctuary. There are different ways this idea of safe space is enacted in higher education institutions. Faculty mentor-mentee relationships, support groups, and religious communities can be examples of interpersonal use of safe space. Physical spaces, such as student housing or services, can also be designated at sanctuary places as well. To think of safe space as a sanctuary also is very dependent on what the person is seeking respite from. For some people, safe spaces are where they would not be subject to abuse and/or traumatizing or triggering events. Others may interpret this use as protection from uncomfortable feelings, controversial or volatile topics, or dissenting viewpoints.

Safe Space as Balkanization

There have been uses of safe space as a means to separate groups of people from one another in way that results in a fragmented broader community. Within these safe spaces, groups do not engage with one another. Rather, it can sometimes be a divisive dynamic between members of a group and non-members within a space. The University of Missouri example, highlighted above, represents how safe spaces could be used to keep people out, just as much as it was meant to protect people within. Depending on the usage, safe spaces can be used as an isolationist practice which may result in more homogeneous than heterogeneous social groups.

Safe Space as Silencer

Opponents of safe spaces view the practice as a means to limit freedom of speech. With this use of safe space, people feel unable to speak freely for fear of repercussions, especially if it is a dissenting sentiment. Recent protest against invited controversial speakers at institutions like Middlebury College, University of California Berkeley, and more recently The University of Pennsylvania are just some examples where the use of safe space has been interpreted to mean silencing people with differing viewpoints.[15] Student groups may also experience different types of safe space. Safe spaces can also be used to limit academic freedom, as faculty find themselves unable to teach certain topics or in a certain manner for fear of repercussions or public outcry. Use of this space is often an unforgiving one where mistakes can be costly to the transgressor.

news/2005/09/21/what-should-us-commission-do

15 Johnson, E. (2019, October 25.) Controversial speaker ICEd out by Penn Students. *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/10/25/penn-shuts-down-former-ice-director%E2%80%99s-speech-following-protests-petition

Moving Forward

As we move forward thinking about the role that safe spaces play in higher education, it is clear that the discussion around the idea is not only focused on definition, but eventually becomes a conversation about limits. For example, few people would argue that physical safety of persons on campus should be ignored. However, when pushed up against fiscal solvency of the institution, as seen with the budgetary effects of COVID-19, institutions start to determine to what extent our concern about safety ends. Generally, people discourage the use of derogatory and racist slurs, but when it abuts issues of academic freedom or freedom of speech, the value of safety comes into question and at what cost. Because of the complexity surrounding safe space, determining when and how they should be used can pose as ethical dilemmas for stakeholders. Regardless of a decision made, some value (e.g., safety, freedom, autonomy, dignity, or justice) may be compromised in the process.

This brief presents five main questions to help stakeholders think further about safe spaces and the ways they want to interpret or implement the idea:

1. **What is the purpose for the safe space in question?**
    a. Is it an expansive (e.g., place to say anything) or limiting (e.g., place to keep something out) space? And to what extent?

2. **Why is this safe space needed?**
    a. What is lost if that space is not implemented?

3. **Who is this safe space for? Who is excluded?**

4. **What values are upheld and which are compromised?**

5. **What are the potential benefits and harms of this safe space?**
    a. Could another policy or practice achieve the same benefits with fewer harms?

These questions could help stakeholders across an institution more clearly define safe space, articulate the need, and weigh options for implementation. Being more clear about the ways we think about safe space is important because safe spaces may be renegotiated at any time. Having these ideas of safe space clearly articulated can help reduce some of the abstraction, and potentially move conversations away from philosophical debate to more concrete policy evaluation or better compromise.

Conclusion

In recent years, the caricatures of safe space appear to have receded somewhat. Even though it is still used as an exemplification of how higher education institutions fall prey to liberal ideas and social justice agendas, the recent usages seem more tempered. This change could be due to elements of the safe space debate finding its way to newer terms, such as in the idea of “Cancel Culture.” The change may also be due to the shift in language that universities are taking, moving away from the now polarizing term of "safe space" to something more acceptable like "brave space" (Ali, 2017). However, even if the more uncharitable misunderstandings wane, safe space and its evolutions will still be a topic that higher education policymakers will have to address. The tensions around safe space will continue as part and parcel of the democratic values that institutions espouse. If higher education institutions want to continue to promote diversity and inclusivity, while also upholding the values of free speech and academic freedom, policy makers will have to continue navigating these conflicts.

Additional Resources

Campus Pride. *Safe Space Program*. **https://www.campuspride.org/safespace/**

Crocket, E. (2016, August 25). Safe spaces, explained. *Vox*. **https://www.vox.com/2016/7/5/11949258/safe-spaces-explained**

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