

# Fighting for safe spaces

*Students voice marginalized perspectives at a cost*

By **KATE NUSSENBAUM**

SENIOR EDITOR

Thursday, May 21, 2015

*This article is part of the series [Commencement Magazine 2015](#)*

Within the next few years, most of the students who protested former New York City police commissioner Ray Kelly's scheduled lecture will graduate. The students who fought for the creation of a "safe space" in response to blogger Wendy McElroy's participation in a debate over rape culture will also walk out the Van Wickle Gates. And many of their peers who pushed back against these demonstrations will process through those gates alongside them.

If Brown has succeeded in carrying out its mission statement, all of them will "discharge the offices of life with usefulness and reputation" ready to serve "the community, the nation and the world."

But many students believe the University is falling short of this mission. Some criticized administrators for creating a hostile environment that allows for the marginalization of certain identities, while others expressed disappointment in the University's failure to reaffirm its commitment to free inquiry.

People outside the University, like New York Times columnist Judith Shulevitz, have faulted Brown students for "hiding from scary ideas

Still, many students and faculty members agreed that Shulevitz's assertion — that undergraduates who have fought for the creation of "safe spaces" will be unprepared "for the social and intellectual headwinds that will hit them as soon as they step off the campuses whose climates they have so carefully controlled" — is unfounded.

"In becoming politically active, students find themselves not in an isolated, specialized environment but taking on questions in the academic community that are very much part of what everyone else is confronted with," said Professor of English William Keach.

But it's not entirely clear how Brown — as a particular academic community but also as an integrated part of the "real world" with power dynamics that reflect those of the rest of the country and, perhaps, the world — should best prepare all students to "discharge the offices of life."

Thrust into the middle of this debate are the students who have organized the protests and "safe spaces" on campus over the past few years, students who are now preparing for life after Brown and alums who are already living it. Students and alums who have thought about how Brown can best prepare them and their classmates to serve the world but also what the world they are serving should look like and how to strive toward that vision.

## Learning at a cost

Recent alums and graduating seniors said their involvement in campus activism, including the Kelly protest, has informed their perspectives but often at a high emotional and physical cost.

Katie Byron '15 helped organize a "safe space" in response to a debate the Janus Forum hosted this fall, in which McElroy was invited to debate blogger Jessica Valenti at an event entitled, "How Should Colleges Handle Sexual Assault?" The inclusion of McElroy, who has said



HERALD FILE PHOTO

that sexual assault does not arise due to cultural influences but rather is the result of a few individuals, prompted campus debate. Some students, including Byron, mobilized to both protest the event and create a “safe space” in a classroom outside the lecture hall where students could go to talk to sexual assault peer educators, women’s peer counselors and BWell staff if they heard something triggering.

“Experiencing this controversy allows us to become better at articulating our own ideas and our own values and what we think our community values can be,” Byron said.

Cynthia Fong ’14 helped to organize the protest against the lecture by Kelly, who implemented controversial stop-and-frisk policing, host the Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions in fall 2013. She said that she learned from the Providence community members with whom she worked to plan the demonstration. “They have been organizing their entire lives,” she said. “I learned a lot about what it means to care for other people, be angry with other folks and really be in a community that cares about a lot of things.”

Still, she added, “I remember when I was organizing for Ray Kelly, I couldn’t sleep that night. I couldn’t walk to class without fearing that people would throw things at me.”

JuHee Kwon ’14, who also helped to organize the Kelly protest, echoed many of Fong’s sentiments. “I connected with people in a way that didn’t think was possible. I saw a glimpse of what the world could be and should be,” Kwon said.

Both Kwon and Fong currently live in the San Francisco Bay area and are involved with the organization “#Asians4BlackLives.”

The Kelly protest was “a really important moment for me to think about what Asian people should do in support of black lives,” Kwon said.

Still, “I think people underestimate how taxing student organizing is because they come into it with specific experiences, specific reasons doing it. A lot of their passions come from family and personal experiences,” Kwon added. “To ask them to constantly pour themselves out like that is fulfilling but also really, really hard and traumatic.”

Daniel Echevarria ’16, one of the organizers of the Kelly protest, said that his experience organizing will inform his later work. “But at the same time, I still have to live here. ... This is my home.”

### **A ‘dual burden’**

Several students interviewed also articulated what Fong called a “dual burden” — many who already feel marginalized on campus also feel disproportionately tasked with vocalizing silenced perspectives. Students who have personal experience with police brutality or sexual assault and might already struggle to feel comfortable on campus may also feel the most burdened to protest University policy or speak out against certain invited speakers. Those who enter Brown with the fewest resources at their disposal feel the strongest need to fight for more resources.

Echevarria noted that, as a person of color, he originally did not want to be involved in the Kelly protest. “You’re lucky to be here. You do start stuff,” he said. “The actual courage it takes to have your voice heard is obviously going to be easier for someone who is privileged.”

But some indicated that this unequal burden, while a challenge, is also inevitable.

Walker Mills ’15, a former Herald opinions columnist, said though he believes the University should do all it can to ensure that students have an “equal playing field, ... some students are going to have a tougher time because of the nature of the experience here.” He added, “If you challenge and struggle deeply, I think that’s a really valuable thing. I think that if you insulate people, you’re not preparing them to do it.”

“I’m sympathetic to peoples’ feeling of exhaustion and of stress at having to debate these things out,” Keach said. “I just don’t think ultimately there’s a way around this.” He added that though the power structures of Brown are not identical to those that operate around the United States, “they are different versions of the same underlying fabric of socioeconomic forces that define and determine all our lives.”

But the fact that Brown may provide student activists with a forum with which to stand up to power structures similar to those that exist in other communities — whether different cities or even the United States as a whole — is not a good reason for the University to not actively become more responsive to the needs and voices of students from different backgrounds, multiple students said.

“That’s like saying, ‘I will chase you just so you learn how to run,’” Fong said. “Why don’t you just not chase me in the first place?”

“We are not grateful that structures of oppression exist just so we can learn how to do this,” she added.

### **Debating debate**

The University needs to “create a playing field and an environment where folks are able to come to the table equally,” said Will Furuyama;

who participated in the Kelly protest outside List Art Center. It needs to “recognize the power imbalances and actively work to correct the he added.

“We need to be able to have conversations in ways that aren’t putting the humanity of people up for debate,” Byron said. “College is a lim space that is separate from the real world. ... Our norms can differ because we can say, ‘we don’t appreciate all the norms of the real world.’ “We’re holding each other to a higher standard,” she said.

But part of the way that the University can move closer to this ideal is by ensuring that people have the opportunity to hear “competing narratives,” Echevarria said, noting that he found the Kelly event problematic because it failed to present any sort of counternarrative to Kelly’s views.

It was hypocritical that administrators punished the Kelly protesters for preventing the occurrence of a lecture presenting a singular perspective, but then organized a competing lecture during the Janus Forum’s scheduled debate on sexual assault policy, Echevarria add

Dana Schwartz ’15, who was the Janus Forum’s fellows director last semester, also noted her disappointment with the University for scheduling a concurrent event at the time of their debate. “The best way to demolish bad beliefs is to address them face on,” Schwartz sai “The privilege of Brown students and our education is that we are intelligent, rational, well-educated human beings. When faced with a or misinterpreted analysis of information, we can ask intelligent questions.”

She called student protest a “valuable tool.”

“Challenge is what grows students, citizens who can be engaged critically and in an intellectually rigorous way,” she said, but added that i might be easier for her to hold this perspective given her inherent privilege as a white, cisgender, straight person.

The debate over how the University should respond to these events and accusations has divided the faculty as well.

In February, faculty members voted to indefinitely table a resolution to reaffirm “Brown’s commitment to the principles of academic freedom.”

After a heated back-and-forth discussion detailed in the faculty meeting minutes, President Christina Paxson P’19 suggested postponing motion indefinitely, rather than bringing it back up at the April meeting. Raising the issue again in April would only “extend the pain,” sa Tricia Rose, professor of Africana Studies and director of the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America, at the February mee noting that another conversation would likely not yield a productive solution to the divide between the polarized opinions of faculty men

## **Moving forward**

The conversations that played out at that faculty meeting echo the types of conversations that have occurred across campus forms over th past few years — debates that students and faculty members interviewed said are too complex to be boiled down to “safety” versus “free speech.”

Many of the students interviewed said that moving forward, the University should not narrowly focus on procedures for vetting potential invited speakers or debating the finer points of what terms like “academic freedom” really mean. Instead, Brown administrators, faculty members and students should work together to alleviate the discrepancy in the experiences between students who have the type of privil Schwartz described — as well as greater financial resources — and those who do not.

Part of those efforts may involve pushing students to be more critical, Echevarria said. “I don’t know if that’s an administrative objective. Ethnic Studies its own department yet? How many Africana classes are there?”

Brown should also ramp up the support it offers to first-generation students, shift its policies and expand the resources it devotes to mak survivors of sexual assault feel safe and ensure that “low-income students have enough money to get by and not feel ostracized by their peers,” Fong said.

“If I learned what it meant to feel supported at Brown, I would have more to tackle the world with,” she said. “I should learn what it mea have safe spaces and then I should translate that.”

