

1-6-2016

Hope and faith in the unseen: a reminder for the new year

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Recommended Citation

Hemesath M. 2016 Jan 6. Hope and faith in the unseen: a reminder for the new year [blog]. Quad 136. [Accessed 2017 June 14]. <http://blogs.csbsju.edu/mhemesath/2016/01/06/hope-and-faith-in-the-unseen-a-reminder-for-the-new-year/>.

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Quad 136

More Complicated Than They Look

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As is Often the Case: Campus Politics are More Complicated Than They Look



Image: Lam Thuy Vo via Flickr

I was recently talking to an alum who wondered about the atmosphere on the Saint John's and Saint Ben's campuses, given all the recent news about unrest at schools around the country. He wondered whether millennials and current faculty are really so different than they were when he went to school several decades ago.

The last couple months have been filled with protests and unrest on college campuses across the country. A number of issues have been raised but concerns have focused on race, identity and creating safe and comfortable environments on campus. A flavor of the protests can be gleaned from the students' concerns. Cato Institute Scholar Walter Olson gathered **various student demands** from across the country which include, in the college paper of Guilford College, "We

suggest that every week a faculty member come forward & publicly admit their participation in racism..." and some Wesleyan University students want "An anonymous student reporting system for cases of bias, including microaggressions, perpetrated by faculty and staff."

The tone of the protests, with the criticism of **those with other perspectives** and the occasional **confrontation with the media**, have led to important questions about the role of free expression and First Amendment protections on college campuses. Some critics have even **likened the mood to a much darker era** in 20th century German history:

We've seen at several colleges — most explicitly at Amherst — the call to curtail free speech and academic freedom in favor of particular claims to "social justice." I keep expecting someone to say any time now: "The much vaunted 'academic freedom' will be driven from the . . . university, for this freedom is spurious because purely negative." Sounds about right, no? What's missing from the ellipses above? The word "German." Go plug it back in and reread it, for this was the phrase Martin Heidegger included in his infamous rector's address at the University of Freiburg in 1933, when he threw in his lot with the Nazis.

The latter parallel seems a bit strong at this point, even with some of the real concerns about freedom of expression and open debate at universities.

What is also very important to note is that the media's portrayal of the mood on campus is at best incomplete. Student marches and protests make for good TV and seemingly outrageous student demands play well in print media, but those involved with the campus protests, which have yet to be given a name, represent only a minority of the campus population.

I think it is safe to say that a plurality and maybe even a majority of students, faculty and staff on campuses do not share the views of the most ardent protestors. Those uninvolved are either apolitical — meaning they are uninterested in campus politics and are simply focused on their own objectives and priorities, mainly getting an education to move ahead in life — or they are not openly engaged because they do not want to publicly disagree with the protestors and **face a potential backlash for engaging the debate**.

What is interesting is that in recent weeks there has been a third group — beyond the apolitical and those keeping their heads down of critics of the student protests and the perceived mood on campuses: those who have actively defended freedom of expression and speech. At Brown **there is an underground forum** in which anonymous participants can openly share their views on any controversial issue. The founder of the forum, sophomore Chris Robotham acknowledges that the anonymous structure is not ideal, but believes it is a start on the way toward more open debate.

At Princeton some students are pushing back, **writing and signing a letter** that says, “We are concerned mainly with the importance of preserving an intellectual culture in which all members of the Princeton community feel free to engage in civil discussion and to express their convictions without fear of being subjected to intimidation or abuse. Thanks to recent polls, surveys, and petitions, we have reason to believe that our concerns are shared by a majority of our fellow Princeton undergraduates.”

“We firmly believe that there should be no space at a university in which any member of the community, student or faculty, is “safe” from having his or her most cherished and even identity-forming values challenged. It is the very mission of the university to seek truth by subjecting all beliefs to critical, rational scrutiny.”

Some administrators and faculties have felt the need to come out openly in defense of free expression and inquiry. Writing in the Orange County Register, **Chapman University Chancellor Daniele C. Struppa noted** that the Chapman faculty recently passed a statement in support of free speech and reminded readers that:

Academia, once so fiercely supportive of free speech and against any form of censorship, is now beginning to question its value. Some, in fact, are proposing to put explicit limits on it. And, if so, who determines which groups can be made fun of? Who determines which groups are untouchable? Who, ultimately, will be the censor, who decides what can be said, taught or performed? Those in academia who don't perceive this danger will soon find out that the limits to speech they are seeking will bite their own hands.

Some Yale faculty have come out in defense of the lecturer, Erika Christakis, who is at the center of the Halloween **costume letter controversy**. (Despite the support, Christakis has since **decided to stop teaching** at Yale.)

At the University of Chicago, the Committee on Freedom of Expression was appointed in July 2014 by President Robert J. Zimmer and Provost Eric D. Isaacs, “in light of recent events nationwide that have tested institutional commitments to free and open discourse.” The committee **drafted a statement** “articulating the University's overarching commitment to free, robust, and uninhibited debate and deliberation among all members of the University's community.”

The statement has been adopted or modified by a number of institutions and Greg Lukianoff, President, Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) **argues in the Huffington Post** that “Every University in the Country Should Adopt the

University of Chicago's Academic Freedom Statement," writing:

The Chicago statement is one of the best, most inspiring declarations of the critical importance of free speech on college campuses that I have seen in my career. And make no mistake about it, if universities reaffirm the necessity of free speech on campus, our students will enjoy better educations.

The point here is not to defend the notions of academic freedom, free expression and unfettered inquiry on the University campus. The philosophies of open inquiry and exploration are obviously built into the founding DNA of any university worthy of the name.

Those outside the academy should remain confident that even if free speech is used to limit speech, an irony missed by most current protesters, there are still plenty of individuals on campuses—students, faculty and staff, who share the sentiment of **Evelyn Beatrice Hall**, author of a biography of Voltaire, who said, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

By **Michael Hemesath** | December 7th, 2015 | Categories: **Uncategorized** | **0 Comments**

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] **PrezHemesath**.