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Observations on the “Disinvitation” season

Michael Hemesath

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mhemesath@csbsju.edu

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Quad 136

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Observations on the “Disinvitation” Season

Stephen Carter, a law professor at Yale, has a [commencement address for the Millennials](#) entitled “Dear Class of 2014: Thanks for not Disinviting Me.”

While the humor and mild sarcasm naturally overstate and over-generalize his criticisms, Carter makes an important point about the need for true listening and empathy with alternative viewpoints if one truly wants to facilitate change in the world:

Given your generation’s penchant for shutting down speakers with whom you disagree, I am assuming that you have no intention of playing any serious adult role in mediating...conflicts. And that’s fine. We should leave the task of mediation to those unsophisticated enough to be sensitive to the concerns of both sides.



Carter, of course, knows that not all students (or faculty) want to shut down conversations about controversial topics, but his comments are a reminder to those who value the free and vigorous exchange of ideas, as all true students of the liberal arts should, that if you do not defend the free speech rights of those whose views you may not agree with, then others may prevent such exchanges.

Former Princeton president William Bowen also had some [“sharp” remarks](#) about this topic when speaking to Haverford College graduates about the withdrawal of a former Berkeley Chancellor from Haverford’s commencement. He “called the student protestors’ approach both ‘immature’ and ‘arrogant’ and the subsequent withdrawal of Robert J. Birgeneau...a ‘defeat’ for the Quaker college and its ideals.”

In this commencement season it is perhaps worth remembering French Enlightenment writer and philosopher Voltaire’s famous statement, “I disagree strongly with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | May 22nd, 2014 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

About the Author: **Michael Hemesath**



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](#).