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Some hopeful news from our little corner of higher ed

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Quad 136

of Higher Ed

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

Some Hopeful News From Our Little Corner of Higher Ed



The past few weeks have not been American higher education's proudest. Student protests at [Yale](#), [Missouri](#), Ithaca College, [Amherst](#), the [University of Michigan](#), and [Princeton](#), among others, have been viewed critically by many outside observers (see [The Daily Beast](#) and [CNN](#)) as well as those within higher education (see [The Washington Post](#) and [the Chronicle of Higher Ed](#)).

At Yale, some students were upset by an email encouraging them to lighten up in their response to politically insensitive Halloween costumes. No offending costumes had been worn by students, but the outrage flowed from an email prior to Halloween itself. At Missouri, the situation is a bit more complicated but the original protests that brought down the president and chancellor focused on the perceived inadequate response of the administration to several racial incidents on campus, even as the [details](#) around those alleged incidents remain unclear. Protests of other students in Higher education have either been in solidarity with their peers at Yale or Missouri or due to local concerns about racism and inclusivity.

The criticisms focused largely on the issue of free speech. The students in most of these cases appeared to be uninterested in the intellectual give and take that is at the heart of the academic enterprise. Grappling with and engaging dissenting views is how one moves toward greater understanding of others and the world. This process is challenging, hard work, often uncomfortable and even painful. But the image presented of American universities in recent weeks is one of [students \(and even faculty and staff\)](#) deeply *uninterested* in uncomfortable learning and willing to use threats and intimidation to prevent the airing of alternative views that might be challenging.

Jencey Paz, a Yale student, succinctly captured this view when she wrote in an op-ed for the [Yale Herald](#), "I don't want to debate. I want to talk about my pain."

Given the importance of the First Amendment in American life and history it is not surprising that criticism of this ethos came from both sides of the political aisle. President Obama [defended free speech](#), saying:

I've heard of some college campuses where they don't want to have a guest speaker who is too conservative or they don't want to read a book if it has language that is offensive to African-Americans or

somehow sends a demeaning signal toward women. I've got to tell you, I don't agree with that, either. I don't agree that you, when you become students at colleges, have to be coddled and protected from different points of view.... You don't have to be fearful of somebody spouting bad ideas. Just out-argue them. Beat them. Make the case as to why they're wrong.

Obama said he was “worried” that young people were becoming “trained” to think that if they disagree with someone, that if their feelings get hurt, their “only recourse is to shut them up.”

George Will, coming from a different political perspective, **wrote**:

If you believe, as progressives do, that human nature is not fixed, and hence is not a basis for understanding natural rights. And if you believe, as progressives do, that human beings are soft wax who receive their shape from the society that government shapes. And if you believe, as progressives do, that people receive their rights from the shaping government. And if you believe, as progressives do, that people are the sum of the social promptings they experience. Then it will seem sensible for government, including a university's administration, to guarantee not freedom of speech but freedom from speech. From, that is, speech that might prompt its hearers to develop ideas inimical to progress, and might violate the universal entitlement to perpetual serenity.

While many of the criticisms are justified and much of the students' behavior is inimical to the very idea of the university, it is important to remember that there remains significant diversity of thought and attitudes on college campuses. Consider my experience on a recent visit to China.

A small group from the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University and I were at Southwest University in Beibei, China, recently to celebrate the 30th anniversary of our exchange program. While there, we spent some time with the group of our students studying there this semester. I had the chance to talk to most of them and asked them how they ended up studying in Western China. I expected to hear that they were mostly experienced travelers for whom, having already done Europe and maybe experienced somewhere in South American or the more developed parts of China or Japan, the less known western regions of China were simply the next step in their world travels. What I found was quite the opposite. Most of the students had never been to China and several had not even been out of North America prior this adventure. We have nearly twenty off-campus options at CSB and SJU, so I wondered why they did not opt for the more traditional London or Greco-Rome alternative.

To a person, they gave some variant of the following: “I wanted to go to a place where I would not be in the majority.” “I wanted to test myself.” “I wanted a challenge.” “I wanted to get out of my comfort zone.”

Choosing a study abroad program is not exactly parallel to the choices about protesting that college students were making in the past weeks, but I can't help thinking that the college students recently splashed all over the media could learn something valuable about their education from these brave and adventurous Bennies and Johnnies.

Students sharing the attitudes of the Bennies and Johnnies I met in China obviously exist in great numbers at Yale and Missouri too. They just were not getting much air time in the past few weeks.



their education.

So there is no need to despair about **millennials** and the universities they attend. Most understand that uncomfortable learning is central to

By **Michael Hemesath** | November 23rd, 2015 | Categories: **Higher Education** | **0 Comments**

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