

The Opinion Pages | Op-Ed Columnist, Nicholas Kristof

Mizzou, Yale and Free Speech

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Concerned Student 1950 supporters protesting at the University of Missouri on Monday. Credit Daniel Brenner for The New York Times

On university campuses across the country, from Mizzou to Yale, we have two noble forces colliding with explosive force.

One is a concern for minority or marginalized students and faculty members, who are often left feeling as outsiders in ways that damage everyone's education. At the University of Missouri, a black professor, Cynthia Frisby, wrote, "I have been called the N-word too many times to count."

The problem is not just racists who use epithets but also administrators who seem to acquiesce. That's why Mizzou students — especially football players — used their clout to oust the university system's president. They showed leadership in trying to rectify a failure of leadership.

But moral voices can also become sanctimonious bullies.

“Go, go, go,” some Mizzou protesters yelled as they jostled a student photographer, Tim Tai, who was trying to document the protests unfolding in a public space. And Melissa Click, an assistant professor who joined the protests, is heard on a video calling for “muscle” to oust another student journalist (she later apologized).

Tai represented the other noble force in these upheavals — free expression. He tried to make the point, telling the crowd: “The First Amendment protects your right to be here — and mine.”

We like to caricature great moral debates as right confronting wrong. But often, to some degree, it’s right colliding with right.

Yes, universities should work harder to be inclusive. And, yes, campuses must assure free expression, which means protecting dissonant and unwelcome voices that sometimes leave other people feeling aggrieved or wounded.

On both counts we fall far short.

We’ve also seen Wesleyan students cut funding for the student newspaper after it ran an op-ed criticizing the Black Lives Matter movement. At Mount Holyoke, students canceled a production of “The Vagina Monologues” because they felt it excluded transgender women. Protests led to the withdrawal of Condoleezza Rice as commencement speaker at Rutgers and Christine Lagarde at Smith.

This is sensitivity but also intolerance, and it is disproportionately an instinct on the left.

I’m a pro-choice liberal who has been invited to infect evangelical Christian universities with progressive thoughts, and to address Catholic universities where I’ve praised condoms and birth control programs. I’m sure I discomfited many students on these conservative campuses, but it’s a tribute to them that they were willing to be challenged. In the same spirit, liberal universities should seek out pro-life social conservatives to speak.

More broadly, academia — especially the social sciences — undermines itself by a tilt to the left. We should cherish all kinds of diversity, including the presence of conservatives to infuriate us liberals and make us uncomfortable. Education is about stretching muscles, and that’s painful in the gym and in the lecture hall.

One of the wrenching upheavals lately has unfolded at Yale. Longtime frustrations among minority students boiled over after administrators seemed to them insufficiently concerned about offensive costumes for Halloween. A widely circulated video showed a furious student shouting down one administrator, Prof. Nicholas Christakis. “Be quiet!” she screams at him. “It is not about creating an intellectual space!”

A student wrote an op-ed about “the very real hurt” that minority students feel, adding: “I don’t want to debate. I want to talk about my pain.” That prompted savage commentary online. “Is Yale letting in 8-year-olds?” one person asked on Twitter. Free speech has nothing to do with listening to a diversity of opinions. Condoleeza Rice does not have a free speech right to give a paid...

The Wall Street Journal editorial page denounced “Yale’s Little Robespierres.” It followed up Wednesday with another editorial, warning that the P.C. mind-set “threatens to undermine or destroy universities as a place of learning.”

I suggest we all take a deep breath.

The protesters at Mizzou and Yale and elsewhere make a legitimate point: Universities should work harder to make all students feel they are safe and belong. Members of minorities — whether black or transgender or (on many campuses) evangelical conservatives — should be able to feel a part of campus, not feel mocked in their own community.

The problems at Mizzou were underscored on Tuesday when there were death threats against black students. What’s unfolding at universities is not just about free expression but also about a safe and nurturing environment.

Consider an office where bosses shrug as some men hang nude centerfolds and leeringly speculate about the sexual proclivities of female colleagues. Free speech issue? No! That’s a hostile work environment. And imagine if you’re an 18-year-old for whom this is your 24/7 home — named, say, for a 19th-century pro-slavery white supremacist.

My favorite philosopher, the late Sir Isaiah Berlin, argued that there was a deep human yearning to find the One Great Truth. In fact, he said, that’s a dead end: Our fate is to struggle with a “plurality of values,” with competing truths, with trying to reconcile what may well be irreconcilable.

That’s unsatisfying. It’s complicated. It’s also life.