Improve Your Office Hours

Sitting in, walking out, and acting up for equity.

Check out the new Thought & Action journal.

Woot! Woot! Professors of the Year!

Racism on campus? Yes, it’s real. See back cover.
Cutting Pell Grants is “not okay.”

A $634 MILLION FUNDING GAP FOR FEDERAL PELL GRANTS in 2017 embedded in the U.S. House’s proposed education budget is simply “not okay,” said NEA Student Chair Chelsey Herrig. More than 8.6 million poor Americans relied on Pell Grants this year to afford the escalating costs of a college degree. And yet, proposed FY2016 U.S. House and Senate education budgets create funding gaps for the Pell program that would require Congress to either find hundreds of millions of dollars over the next two years, or cut Pell Grants — a move that would slam shut the doors of opportunity to millions of Americans. In November, NEA joined more than 25 student advocacy organizations in writing to House and Senate leaders, asking them to protect Pell Grants. “We believe strongly that all Americans should have the opportunity to attain higher education, no matter their family income,” said NEA higher-ed policy specialist Mark F. Smith. You can help by getting involved in NEA’s Degrees not Debt campaign at nea.org/degreesnotdebt.

You’ve got potential (to lead!)

THE 2016-17 EMERGING LEADERS ACADEMY is looking for applicants. The program is open to NEA Higher Ed members from all institutions, in all job categories. The purpose is to provide hands-on training for new and future leaders that will help strengthen the long-term viability and effectiveness of local and state associations. To find out more, visit www.nea.org/home/37067.htm

The 2016 NEA Higher Ed conference

THE 2016 NEA HIGHER EDUCATION conference will be held April 1-3 at the Sheraton Hotel and Marina in San Diego. Online conference registration is underway. For more information, visit www.nea.org/he.

Get the new Thought & Action

HAVE YOU ORDERED your copy of the fall/winter issue of Thought & Action? Go to www.subscribea.org and use the code NEAHIGHERED. Articles focus on “equity, diversity, and social justice” and also can be found at nea.org/thoughtandaction.

The panel also invites your submissions for a special focus section: “In Search of a More Perfect Union...” The deadline is January 15. For more information, see nea.org/thoughtandaction.
Is 2016 the year of “We’ve Finally Had Enough”?

In recent months, protests against racism unfurled on campuses across the U.S., as Black students sat-in or walked-out, and called on college administrators to act against racist practices. In Missouri, their collective outrage toppled a university system president. Meanwhile, at urban universities in California, New York, and Illinois, thousands of faculty and staff also have demonstrated, demanding administrators invest in higher education for their often marginalized students. What all of these activists—students and educators alike—have in common is this: A shared vision that social justice can be realized on campuses, that their collective voice can make things happen, and that all students can be enabled an equal opportunity to learn.
Two days before the start of the fall semester this year, the University of Missouri announced to its thousands of graduate assistants that it was yanking their employer-provided health insurance. Left reeling, the grad assistants wondered how they would pay for their medications, or even how they would deliver their babies, recalls Ph.D. student Eric O. Scott. And so they met, in the hundreds, to talk about how to get a voice in their working conditions. “I was speaking, and I didn’t say the word ‘union,’” But people were shouting the word ‘union’ from the audience,” said Scott. Soon after that meeting, the grad students in that room became the Coalition of Graduate Workers, a unionizing group with the support of the Missouri National Education Association (MNEA). Its members seek to improve teaching and learning conditions at the University of Missouri, and also have become a force for social justice, aligned with student groups formed to address institutional racism on campus.

“People really respond to the idea that this isn’t just about workplace benefits. It’s also about your students,” said Connor Lewis, a Coalition organizer and Missouri grad student of history.

The Missouri grad assistants (GAs) aren’t unique in their broad view of unionism. In fact, GA unions rarely focus solely on salaries and benefits. Instead, they typically “function as social movement unions that link the struggles of graduate employees to the pursuit of social justice,” wrote Deeb-Paul Kitchen in 2014 in NEA’s journal of higher education Thought & Action.

This is also true of many NEA Higher Ed faculty and staff unions, as well as NEA-Student chapters and K12 associations. NEA has a long history of promoting racial equality and social justice—from its mid-20th century efforts around school desegregation to its newest work, charged by the 2015 NEA Representative Assembly in July, to spotlight the institutional racism and educational injustice that affects students.

“On a nearly daily basis, we hear disturbing stories: a student viciously beaten then arrested by campus police for underage drinking; racial slurs hurled at a student body president; a noose found hanging on a statue of a university’s first black student... These experiences aren’t new. But we are witnessing students speaking out, demanding justice, recognition, and an end to these purposeful and inherent prejudices,” wrote NEA President Lily Eskelsen García in a recent blog post. “These beautiful, brave rabble rousers will not be silenced. And neither will we.”

Faculty Revolt

What makes a good teacher—or professor—has been on the minds of NEA Higher Ed members lately. During October’s Campus Equity Week events, which included a Capitol Hill briefing that featured members from California and Illinois, it was made clear that the “working conditions of faculty are the learning conditions of
students,” said Judy Olson, chair of NEA’s Contingent Faculty Caucus.

The fact is that the more interaction students have with faculty, the more likely they will graduate, earn better grades, and develop critical thinking and leadership skills—and this is especially true for students of color. That meaningful faculty-student interaction however is limited when professors need to run to their second or third jobs, or can’t afford to live in the community, or aren’t compensated for office hours.

In California, more than 1,000 faculty, staff, and students marched on Nov. 17 to the California State University (CSU) chancellor’s office. Their chant—“We are the union! The mighty mighty union! Fighting for justice! And for education!”—could be heard a quarter-mile away.

At the heart of CSU faculty’s complaint is the heartbreaking dissolution of the “People’s University,” the great California tradition of providing an excellent public higher education to all state residents, no matter their family income. These days, CSU student tuition is on the rise, while CSU faculty pay is on the decline. “How can we expect them [faculty] to inspire students to achieve the American Dream when they can’t even attain it for themselves?” wrote Art Pulaski, leader of the California State Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, in a recent letter to CSU Chancellor Tim White.

In November, with contract negotiations at a standstill, members of the California Faculty Association voted by 94 percent to authorize a strike. It’s a move that many students would support, said Jen Ovalle, a CSU Dominguez Hills student, because students need “teachers who can spend time with their students,” she told CFA Headlines. Students have very little sympathy for Chancellor White, given that he “earns more than the President of the United States,” she said.

Likewise, adjunct faculty at the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), the state’s largest community college, serving a student body that is 84 percent students of color, are making it clear that “you can’t put students first, if you put faculty last.” For months, union members have been picketing outside trustees’ meetings and joining city-wide demonstrations for low-wage workers. While adjuncts at CCC teach 60 percent of its classes, their salaries account for less than 3 percent of its budget. In fact, an adjunct professor teaching three classes per semester at CCC earns about $14,130 a year, or less than the chancellor’s bonus pay last year.

Meanwhile, in New York City, nearly 50 professors from the City University of New York (CUNY) were arrested Nov. 4, while blockading the doors to CUNY’s administrative building and refusing to move until they got a fair offer on their long-expired contract. Professional Staff Congress (PSC) members are demanding CUNY take steps to retain excellent faculty members, and also ensure a quality education for its 500,000 students.

Union members know that half of CUNY undergraduates have family incomes of less than $30,000, and three-quarters are Latino, Black, or Asian. Their education offers a rare chance to break the cycle of permanent poverty in their families—but it depends entirely on the ability of professors to deliver a first-rate education.

“We will not move without an offer that will sustain quality at CUNY and pay us fairly for the important work we do,” said PSC President Barbara Bowen, who was arrested alongside her colleagues.

“The future of our students’ education is at stake in this contract. Our action today is part of a long struggle for racial and educational justice.”

BY MARY ELLEN FLANNERY
Editor, NEA Advocate, mflannery@nea.org mflannery@nea.org

More than 1,000 faculty, staff, and students marched to the California State University chancellor’s office, demanding investment in high-quality higher education.
Rethinking Office Hours

How might you and your students move beyond office hours with passive, question-answering, superficial interaction, and instead use that time together to propel students to the next level in their learning?

Like me, you have probably spent countless hours conversing with students in office hours. At my university, many are first-generation college and/or first-generation immigrant students, thus making it particularly helpful for them to practice talking to adults who will help them build social capital during their university experience. Over the years, the needs of these students, as well as others, have refocused my thinking about the use of office hours in student learning.

In my first few years of teaching, I simply answered questions or chatted with them, if that is what they appeared to need. I had many office hours free to catch up on email. Over the years however, I have become much more careful and circumspect in my approach to office hours and now overtly strive to make them a coordinated part of student learning. The longer I am a professor the more student visits I have; indeed, just over the previous semester, it was a rare office hour that I did not have a student in attendance, as well as many student appointments outside of office hours. Parallel to the increased attendance, I have been refining techniques which make it altogether worthwhile to students to visit my office.
Identify, specify and act

Are you one of the 76 to 83 percent of faculty who attend office hours faithfully (Pfund et al., 2013)? Do you encourage students to “come see me in my office” and talk in class about how certain needs are best addressed in office hours? Exemplary teachers make proactive use of office hours (Hativa et al., 2001) and the conversations taking place in office hours are more significant than generally realized (Limberg, 2007). Students’ visits can effectively focus on one pedagogical angle, depending upon the particular student. Use the first few minutes of a visit to see what the student’s questions are and assess the student’s primary need, which may not necessarily be what the student initially asks about. Examples of pedagogical angles that could serve as a focus for the visit include:

- Developing critical thinking questions (CTQ). Most of my classes require students to devise an individualized CTQ for their class projects. This is often the biggest draw to office hours. It usually takes a few iterations for students to sort through their ideas and the class’ content before they can nail down their research focus. This is often hard for them to do and, without having to require it, usually means talking with most students about their CTQ, whether in the office, after class or via email.
- Writing weaknesses. Going over students’ writing individually with them can help

**TALES FROM REAL LIFE > WINNING WITH THE STUDENT ATHLETE**

Many student athletes are fine students. Clearly, their athletic diligence is related to academic diligence and it is a joy to talk with them, receive invitations to their games, and see their engagement with the course, their sport, and the university. However, there are athletes who have been encouraged to slide by in school and who are not prepared for college level work. For these students it is worth the time to personally explain in office hours that their work does not demonstrate college level readiness, but that no matter what level they are currently at academically they can achieve more. In my experience, they respond to pep talks, and it is not unproductive to shift our discussions into more of a “coaching” mode. Trying to reach these students also extends into the classroom, where fanaticism about a sports team can become an example of regional cultural geography (think the New Orleans Saints, whose “Who dat!” chant is about far more than football) and a map of team loyalty can become an example for my border studies class. Indeed, almost all students become engaged and curious when they see a non-sports oriented person like me discuss the significance of the Saints winning the 2010 Super Bowl XLIV a few years after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

Meet Kim Knowles-Yánez

Kim Knowles-Yánez (kyanez@csusm.edu) is a professor of urban and regional planning in the Liberal Studies Department at California State University San Marcos. She teaches interdisciplinary classes on the environment, border studies, geography, and geospatial analysis. Research interests include the use of geospatial PhotoVoice in children’s environmental decision-making. She has written about her teaching for *The Middle Ground Journal: World History and Global Studies, Les ateliers de l’éthique, the Journal of Geography* and in book chapters for *Gendering Border Studies and Research, Advocacy, and Political Engagement*. She is on the editorial board of *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*. 
to establish grammatical error patterns or show them content and logic problems, such as where their writing raises more questions than it answers. It also provides a chance to tell them personally how our campus writing center will help them. Conversely, heap high praise on the students who are able to communicate well in writing; the aim is to have them leave your office with a greater understanding of the value of this skill set so that they can raise their own expectations of themselves.

- Organizing class material. Particularly on class projects where outside reading and data collection is involved, it often helps students to talk about 1) what they have found so far in their research, and 2) ways to organize the material. Going over their class notes with them is another tactic to take when a student presents as disorganized in their approach.

- Study habits. Ask students how much time they spend on the class or how much time they took to perform a task. I tell them that if they have not spent the recommended 6 hours per week outside of classroom time for my three unit course, then they need to adjust their time they spend on the class or how much time they perceived needs may be met. If they share a personal detail or their opinion about the material, show interest and ask a general non-paring question. This generation of students often share as a result of very involved parenting and because of their social media use, which emphasizes personal experience—the “selfie” generation. They have been acclimated to think that personal experience and opinion are important to express in all matters. My personal teaching philosophy is that they

Personalization

Before a student leaves your office, ask if they have any more questions so that their

“USE THE FIRST FEW MINUTES OF THEIR VISIT TO…ASSESS THE STUDENT’S PRIMARY NEED, WHICH MAY NOT NECESSARILY BE WHAT THE STUDENT INITIALLY ASKS ABOUT.”

should learn the material before interjecting their opinions, but flexibility in my thinking is in order. Turkle notes that office hours are a good time for students to practice speaking face-to-face with adults, a chance they may have more infrequently given the virtual worlds they often inhabit. Avoiding in-person contact with professors in favor of emailing questions means the student is not receiving the support of

Office hours are the rare opportunity to meet our students individually at the level they are currently at with the material. If a student asks a question answered in the syllabus, I immediately verbalize kind concern that they are not putting together the basics of the class, and ask them to pull out his or her copy of the syllabus so that we can go over it. This reinforces that they clearly have access to the material under question and could choose to be more responsible for their own learning. This can be further reinforced through the technique of asking the student how this particular item could have been better expressed in the syllabus. If students cannot make a suggestion, this reinforces that they should have studied the syllabus more carefully and not wasted our time, and it allows me to receive helpful feedback where indeed something could have been made clearer. This technique is an example of replacing what is usually an automatic frustration of faculty—“it’s in the syllabus”—with a personalized learning experience for the student that challenges them to think about aspects of their own performance and guides them toward thinking critically about their own learning and class material. This is an example of how the “in the moment” nature of office hours can facilitate aspects of student learning not usually possible in the classroom.
next to an electrical outlet. It is common to see a student sitting at the bench with her charging electronic device in use. This is probably just what many students need to ease the wait. Second, when discussing something of general, but not personal, concern to the class, raise your voice just loud enough that the students outside the door overhear. Many meetings with students have begun with, “I just heard what you said to (the student who just left) and so that answers my question, but now I want to check something else out with you.” This is a wonderful timesaver and allows students more time to develop their ideas. As an aside, unless the students explicitly suggest it, due to privacy concerns I rarely meet with multiple students at once, even if I know they have the same general question; I don’t want to put the students on the spot and have them agree to meet with others at the same time.

“I JUST HEARD WHAT YOU SAID...SO THAT ANSWERS MY QUESTION, BUT NOW I WANT TO CHECK SOMETHING ELSE OUT WITH YOU.”

Rethinking office hours

It is also possible to use some of these techniques in those 15 or so minutes after class when students approach you with questions and/or in classes that include a lab component, where there is constant one-on-one interaction with students as they work through lab tutorials at their own pace and in your presence. Rethinking the pedagogical aims of office hours requires taking into consideration the needs of individual students, their generational mindset, the physical layout of your office setting, and the content-based aims of the course. According to Jenkins (2015), “Educational research shows teachers can build trust and rapport in common-sense ways...” In McGrath’s experiment with her psychology statistics students, office hours contributed to a measurable improvement in student outcomes (2014).

Where previously you may have been content to use office hours passively, using the time purposefully produces positive results in students and their academic development. Our office hours engagement is propelled by a more meaningful starting point and focus, which then leads toward a more genuine advancement of intellectual and pedagogical outcomes.

REFERENCES & RESOURCES


Professors of the Year

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE NEA HIGHER ED MEMBERS WHO WON STATE PROFESSOR OF THE YEAR 2015! THEY WERE HONORED IN NOVEMBER BY CASE AND THE CARNEGIE FOUNDATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF TEACHING.

RICH BROWN, Western Washington University, “often tells students that if they improve their acting in my classes, that’s bonus, but what I’m most interested in is training their humanity: to create present, compassionate citizens who will connect to others in their lives through their listening and understanding.” His research area is Devised Theater, in which the creators are the performers.

GANIE DEHART, SUNY Geneseo, rarely spends time lecturing her psychology students. Instead they engage in small groups, seek practical ideas, collect data, present results, and more. Over the past 23 years, she has worked with 350 students on a longitudinal study of friend behavior. “Students leave my lab exceptionally well prepared for graduate school or for responsible jobs in the ‘real world.’”

GEOFFREY SADOCK, Bergen Community College, began his college English teaching career 44 years ago. For 36 years, he has directed Bergen’s literary magazine, and done plenty of writing of his own. In all of his efforts, he says, “I have been guided by Cardinal Newman’s understanding that a university, or college, is a place where one imparts and learns, a two-way street, a community of seekers, some fledgling, some fully professed, after the truth.”

CRAIG THOMPSON, Western Wyoming Community College (WWCC). Thompson’s earth sciences and engineering “classroom” extends from his on-campus grant-funded computing lab to the Wind Rivers, a Wyoming mountain range where Thompson’s students have researched melting glaciers. In all places, Thompson, a professor, an engineer, a mentor, and an advocate for the environment, challenges students to live and learn.

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THOUGHT & ACTION

Equity, Diversity & Social Justice

“Why do we have to talk about race? Why can’t we just all get along?” When presented with the issue of white privilege, these are the questions that students often ask Professor Phu Phan and his colleagues. The answers are complicated, but included in Phan’s new article in the latest issue of Thought & Action, NEA’s peer-reviewed journal of higher education. This new issue includes a special focus section on equity, diversity, and social justice, where authors tackle the tough topic of race, but also mental illness and physical disability. It’s now available in print by order at www.subscribenea.org — NEA Higher Ed member should use the code NEAHIGHERED for free delivery — or by download at nea.org/thoughtandaction. Also check out the call for papers on the website.
THE STORY OF THE RICH-POOR WEALTH DIVIDE in America is the story of the White-Black racial divide. And unfortunately, higher education is part of the problem. For Black students, attending college means borrowing money — more often and more of it than their White peers, a new Demos report shows. The result? “The new normal of borrowing for college has not only wreaked havoc on the financial health of a generation of students, it has greatly deepened racial wealth inequality,” said Tamara Draut, Demos vice president of policy and research.

Who Owes What?
Young Black households (with adults aged 25 to 40), especially low-income families, are far more likely than Whites to have student debt. Combine this debt with inequities in labor, housing, and financial markets, and you’ve got “large racial disparities in wealth that show up early in the life course,” the authors write.

Who Owns What?
The typical young White household has nearly $10 for every $1 owned by same-age Black families, “creating a head start for Whites with lifelong impacts,” the authors write.

Who Owes What?
YOUNG WHITE FAMILIES
- With student loans: 39.1%
- With student loans and household income at $50K or below: 15.6%
- With student loans and household income at $25K or below: 5.5%

YOUNG BLACK FAMILIES
- With student loans: 54.4%
- With student loans and household income at $50K or below: 35.9%
- With student loans and household income at $25K or below: 15.8%

Median Wealth of Young Families
- White: $35,800
- Black: $3,600

“THE NEW NORMAL OF BORROWING FOR COLLEGE HAS NOT ONLY WREAKED HAVOC ON THE FINANCIAL HEALTH OF A GENERATION OF STUDENTS, IT HAS GREATLY DEEPENED RACIAL WEALTH INEQUALITY.”
— TAMARA DRAUT, DEMOS VICE PRESIDENT OF POLICY AND RESEARCH

NEA’s Degrees Not Debt
Degrees Not Debt seeks to make sure all Americans have the opportunity to pursue higher education, regardless of race or Zip code, and is asking Congress to:

- Increase federal grants, such as Pell Grants, which nearly two-thirds of Black undergraduate students receive;
- Decrease the cost of student loans, and allow students to refinance their loans when interest rates decline;
- Enhance public service loan forgiveness programs;
- Increase federal aid to institutions, and provide incentives for states to boost funding for institutions, including minority-serving institutions.

The HEA’s original promise was all about creating real opportunities for students to get a high-quality higher education without significant debt — sign NEA’s petition to protect the promise here: HTTPS://ACTIONNETWORK.ORG/PETITIONS/PROTECT-THE-INTERESTS-OF-STUDENTS-WITH-NEW-HEA
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CA Faculty “don’t want to strike. But will.”
A strike authorization vote by the California Faculty Association (CFA) captured 94 percent of the vote in November, and faculty have been rallying in huge numbers for a fair contract. In December, CFA President Jennifer Eagan sent a letter to Chancellor Tim White, asking to meet to settle the dispute. “Years of stagnant pay have taken a hard toll on the CSU faculty. Some have lost their homes and have had to file bankruptcy. Others rely on public assistance to feed their families. Many are living paycheck to paycheck. Faculty who have served this system for decades can scarcely afford to send their own children to university. This is an embarrassment to the California State University system... “The CSU faculty will not sit by idly... We don’t want to strike. But we will.”

Florida’s flagship can do better than this...
The United Faculty of Florida’s chapter at the University of Florida declared impasse in November after the university’s bargaining team refused to budge beyond a 1.25 percent merit raise. “We asked the university to address a variety of issues, including cost-of-living, market equity and equity with other Florida campuses,” said Susan Hegeman, president of United Faculty of Florida-UF. “They refused to address the issues or even provide us with a rationale for their position.”

A lack of respect for Mass community college faculty
“Community colleges are an integral part of the public higher education system, yet the employees who make the schools so successful find themselves under siege,” said Joe LeBlanc, president of the Massachusetts Community College Council (MCCC), which represents the 2,500 full- and part-time employees of the state’s 15 community colleges. Since June 30, MCCC members have been working without a contract, and the state has taken an adversarial stance at the bargaining table, advocating for proposals that would undermine academic freedom, strain the working conditions of faculty and staff, and adversely affect student learning. The union has been advocating for the hiring of more full-time professors who would be available to mentor students. The state’s actions “show a lack of respect for the work that we do and the accomplishments that we achieve,” LeBlanc said.

Faculty and staff protests in NY heat up
The Professional Staff Congress—the union representing 25,000 faculty and staff at the City Universities of New York (CUNY)—are preparing for a strike vote. Members have been working without a contract for five years, and without a salary raise for six—and he university’s offer at the bargaining table amounts to a salary cut since it doesn’t even cover inflation. This fall, PSC members also sent more than 40,000 postcards to New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s office, demanding more state funds for higher education.

TWO-MINUTE INTERVIEW > KATHRYN EDIN

KATHRYN EDIN is a Bloomberg Distinguished Professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University and the co-author of $2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America (HMH), with Luke Shaefer. Recently, Edin spoke with the NEA Advocate.

In the book you describe desperately poor students whose parents have little to zero access to money, or to jobs. What happened in the U.S. to create this population?
Most people don’t know that the American welfare system is dead. There is no catch-net out there, maybe especially in rural and suburban areas. And the bad jobs of today are so much worse than the bad jobs of 15 years ago. If you look at the Bureau of Labor Statistics data, you can see this somewhat through the increase in involuntary part-time employment—these are people like Jennifer H. [featured in the book] who are away from their children for 70 to 80 hours a week, trying to earn a living wage. The American labor market has been so badly degraded, it’s shredded, and these people are just in a desperate search for work.

We know college access is very difficult for the very poor. We also have seen that the students who make it to college often lack the support they need to graduate. What is the solution?
It can be a real culture shift for these kids. For Tabitha, who was from the Delta, it was a brutal adjustment [to private school, and then to college.] We don’t think of American kids needing these basic experiences in socialization, but they really do. Not just rural kids, but also the urban kids. One thing that educators can do is really be on the look out for policies that marginalize poor children unintentionally.

The book also describes how federal policies affect lives. Anything we should pay attention to?
I don’t think any of the kids we met accessed early education programs, and I think it’s because of housing instability. You could imagine that it would be a huge asset to these families. We often talk to people in early Head Start, and they are just warriors out there.
Unite, Inspire, Lead: Transforming Lives through Higher Education

The NEA Higher Education Conference

DATES: April 1-3
LOCATION: San Diego

PURPOSE: To share information, develop skills, network with colleagues and organize around the issues that affect higher education.

To register or find out more about specific sessions, visit nea.org/he
Activism on campus

Can protesters silence academic freedom?

BY JASON WALTA

PROTEST AND CONTROVERSY are roiling campuses across the country—from Yale to Claremont-McKenna to the University of Missouri. Although the protests themselves have largely focused on issues of racial inequality, questions about the student protesters’ tactics and demands have sparked an overarching societal debate about freedom of expression and the role of student activism. And, that debate is quickly becoming a source of division and recrimination.

The current wave of controversy began this past fall at Mizzou, where students protested the administration’s response to charges of racism and other bigotry on campus. The protests included a graduate student’s hunger strike and the football team’s threat to boycott its games until the administration took action. The protesters got results: the university system’s president resigned and the school’s chancellor stepped down; the school announced a series of changes to improve campus climate; and the university’s governing board appointed an interim president who, as a founder of the black student government on campus, had presented his own list of demands to administrators decades ago.

Similar protests erupted across the nation. And, just as quickly as those were spreading, there followed an outpouring of criticism aimed at both the goals and methods of the protestors. Some of the loudest criticism was directed at student protesters at Yale, who demanded the removal of a faculty member from her position as master of a residential college after she sent an email that minimized concerns about wearing racially insensitive Halloween costumes.

These criticisms dovetailed with a broader debate about free speech on campus, in which so-called “trigger warnings” and “safe spaces” have been held up as symbols of students’ supposed desire to be insulated from challenging ideas or opposing viewpoints. One writer called the events at Yale the latest attempt to transform universities into “cossetting nurseries.” Another said that students “are being robbed of resilience and disempowered by mistaken ideological assumptions.”

And, make no mistake, the issues of free speech and academic freedom here are momentous. Universities are—and should remain—bastions of free inquiry for students and faculty alike. That means students are free to protest and to issue whatever demands they think will advance their cause. And, it means that teachers and administrators should tolerate and even invite forceful protest and debate. But, at the same time, schools should not yield to demands that silence faculty or other students. A commitment to academic freedom requires transforming those situations into an instructional moment, when administrators, students, and faculty alike are reminded of the overarching importance of the open exchange of ideas.

We should take exception, however, to the notion that students’ recent demands show they are cosseted, lacking resilience, or somehow seeking to infantilize themselves. On the contrary, these students are taking on deeply entrenched problems, such as institutional racism, and showing that they are determined to do something about it. If anything, it is the would-be adults in the room who have allowed a whole host of pressing societal problems—from economic inequality, to climate change, to gun violence—to fester for decades without meaningful action. There is surely something older generations could learn from the sense of commitment and urgency we see from students today.
Rising Up Against Racism on Campus

RACISM ON CAMPUS on campus can be subtle—an open door that slowly closes as the person of color approaches—or obvious: a “Compton Cookout” or “Chola party” where white students don blackface or paint teardrops in the corners of their eyes and flash mock gang signs in their selfies. It connects the present to historic practices of segregation and exclusion like the note in a woman’s backpack, “Go Back 2 Africa, slave,” to threats of Jim Crow-style violence when skinheads organize to “drive out the mud-colored professors,” or even to enslavement as when white students assaulted, shackled, and held captive a Black student. Yes, in the 21st century! Meanwhile, more covert, institutionalized racism operates in silence while white faculties minimize “diversity” imperatives and proclaim their campuses diverse with token numbers of faculty of color.

Silence on racism is a central feature of white culture. It is hilarious to observe the many ways faculty and administrators avoid using the “r” words: race and racism. Cultural difference is not the problem. It is the institutional practices and cultural consent for them that naturalize white leadership and dominance, maintain racism, and fuel related conflicts. When resources are scant in higher education, particularly at public institutions, we’re told there simply isn’t money for targeted hiring to counter the pattern of white hiring that is legion. A post-Obama, post-Civil Rights, post-racial fiction pronounces us all equal, so any remaining problems are those of problem people, those people of color. This fiction falls flat in face of data that show, 50 years following the Civil Rights Act, 84 percent of full-time professors are white, and the majority of those are male. White male entitlement to the college campus was clearly apparent in the video of white frat kids singing, “there will never be a [n-word] SAE.” Can we imagine innocent racists? Does this not harken to the smiling white faces at the scene of innumerous lynchings?

Against covert, institutional racism and in-your-face racism, Black students are rising up, knowing they will only retard the “pipeline to prison” and transform their relationship to higher education by coming together and demanding change NOW. They have formed a national Black Liberation Collective with chapters across the country, united in their dedication to “transforming institutions of higher education through unity, coalition building, direct action and political education.” This movement drew strength from the recent Missouri protest where the multiracial football team stood with Black students, refusing to play until the university president was unseated for his failure to address racism. Take heed. Student protest is back, fueled by the Black Lives Matter Movement. Coming your way soon. Mizzou that!

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