

May 27, 2014

By [Michael Rushmore](#)

In his [commencement speech last weekend at Haverford College](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/05/19/commencement-speakers-say-everyone-lose-out-protests#sthash.tv6166xN.dpbs), (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/05/19/commencement-speakers-say-everyone-lose-out-protests#sthash.tv6166xN.dpbs>) the former president of Princeton University, William G. Bowen, attempted to shame some students at Haverford for challenging the invitation to the former University of California at Berkeley Chancellor, Robert Birgeneau, to deliver the commencement address and receive an honorary degree. Bowen did not thank us for protesting, but rather for protesting incorrectly. As a new alumnus involved in those efforts as a then-senior at Haverford, I stand by our actions. Bowen should too.

In his much-discussed [commencement speech](http://www.businessinsider.com/william-bowen-full-text-2014-5), (<http://www.businessinsider.com/william-bowen-full-text-2014-5>) Bowen wrote, "Let me be clear at the outset that I am not judging the controversy over Bob Birgeneau's handling of unrest at Berkeley. I have no facts nor the inclination to do so." And yet, Bowen did feel that he had the facts and the inclination to address our method of protesting by challenging Birgeneau.

On November 9, 2011, while Birgeneau was still chancellor, police [beat and injured Occupy Cal protesters at Berkeley](http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/UC-cops-use-of-batons-on-Occupy-camp-questioned-2323415.php). (<http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/UC-cops-use-of-batons-on-Occupy-camp-questioned-2323415.php>) Birgeneau's defense of UC Berkeley police in the use of extreme force against nonviolent protesters, asserted that linking arms is not a form of nonviolent protest, and suggested that the protesters got exactly what they were looking for. While Birgeneau did eventually apologize and accept responsibility for the actions of his police, it reads like a half-hearted apology and does not address his point about protesters being "not nonviolent," and the report he commissioned about the incident notes that not enough steps have been taken to make sure that such an attack does not happen again. Birgeneau's role in and response to these protests do not fit with the values expressed by Haverford College: values of mutual trust, concern and respect.

I and other students and faculty were deeply disturbed by those beatings as well as Birgeneau's response to them. We questioned the wisdom of awarding an honorary degree to Birgeneau at this time, unless he could show us that he was working to make a change. We decided to [write Birgeneau a letter](http://haverfordclerk.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Letter-to-Dr-Robert-Birgeneau). (<http://haverfordclerk.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Letter-to-Dr-Robert-Birgeneau>)

We wrote to him, "When trust is violated in our community, we seek to restore our bonds through restorative, not punitive justice. Restoration involves a full accounting of one's violation, and, ultimately, we return to wholeness through action. In the spirit of our values, we seek to restore trust through action. In the spirit of our values, we seek to restore trust through action. In the spirit of our values, we seek to restore trust through action."

restorative processes, before you are honored by our community, we believe it is necessary for you to do more than offer apology. We ask you to use this opportunity to take responsibility for the events of November 9th not just by apologizing but by taking substantive action.”

Our letter has been characterized in the press as a list of demands, but what we were trying to do was suggest ways that we make amends. If Birgeneau did not do at least some of the things we urged him to do or show us that our claims against him were mistaken, we, with no power to make an actual decision on the matter, would ask Haverford to rescind his invitation.

It became clear that Birgeneau would not do as we had hoped and Haverford would not rescind his invitation, and we began to protest during commencement. The protest would be nondisruptive and largely symbolic. We did not want to ruin commencement for our families or other students. We ordered buttons that said, “Ask me about Robert Birgeneau” and considered turning out when Birgeneau spoke. Before we could decide on a final plan of action, Birgeneau withdrew from the event.

Bowen went on to call us “arrogant” and “immature” for our methods: Writing Birgeneau a letter to suggest possible remedies, expressing concerns about his receipt of an honorary degree, noting in the letter that we were considering asking Haverford College to rescind his invitation, and telling Haverford College President Dan Weiss and the press that some students and faculty would protest commencement in a nondisruptive manner if Birgeneau did receive an honorary degree.

Bowen cited two shining examples of “better” protests of honorary degree recipients. First was the case of George Shultz at Princeton in 1973, when Shultz was President Nixon’s secretary of the treasury. The other was President Obama at the University of Notre Dame in 2009.

As Bowen tells it, many Princeton students objected to having Shultz as that year’s honorary degree recipient, and they expressed their disapproval during commencement by standing up and turning their backs to Shultz. A nonviolent, silent protest. Bowen concluded that “Princeton emerged from this mini-controversy more committed than ever to honoring both the right to protest in proper form and the accomplishments of someone with whose views on some issues many disagreed.”

But that’s not the whole story. Like Haverford students, many Princeton students also [wanted to rescind their speaker’s invitation](http://theprince.princeton.edu/princetonperiodicals/cgi-bin/princetonperiodicals?a=d&d=Princetonian19730502-01.2.1-197-en-20--1--txt-IN-george+shultz-ARTICLE---) (<http://theprince.princeton.edu/princetonperiodicals/cgi-bin/princetonperiodicals?a=d&d=Princetonian19730502-01.2.1-197-en-20--1--txt-IN-george+shultz-ARTICLE--->) They held a vote of the student body, with over 60 percent of voters voting that they did not want to hear Shultz at commencement. Representatives of the student body took that vote to Princeton’s Trustees and [urged them to reconsider the invitation](http://theprince.princeton.edu/princetonperiodicals/cgi-bin/princetonperiodicals?a=d&d=Princetonian19730516-01.2.6&e=-----197-en-20--1--txt-IN-george+shultz-ARTICLE---). (<http://theprince.princeton.edu/princetonperiodicals/cgi-bin/princetonperiodicals?a=d&d=Princetonian19730516-01.2.6&e=-----197-en-20--1--txt-IN-george+shultz-ARTICLE--->) Clearly, students only protested as a last resort when the university declined their request to rescind Shultz’s invitation.

In the case of Notre Dame, Bowen focused on how a retired president of the university spoke out in defense of awarding C

honorary degree and noted that Notre Dame showed itself to be a place where people could “discuss controversial issues : from each other.” There, the majority of protesters were not students or faculty. Most students were supportive of Obama. The administration sided with the will of the students, and some of the minority who disagreed disrupted the ceremony w

At Haverford, students were not in consensus on Birgeneau’s invitation (we try to do things by consensus at Haverford). O held an open forum where over 100 people from all sides came together to peacefully discuss the Birgeneau controversy v another, and those of us who disagreed with the invitation promised not to disrupt the ceremony. The situations at Notre Haverford are apples and oranges, and I can’t figure out why Bowen brought up Notre Dame in contrast to Haverford exce applaud a case where protesters were unsuccessful.

Bowen seems to have a selective memory. Our situation was quite different from Notre Dame’s, and we acted essentially tl students and faculty at Princeton, except we gave Birgeneau a chance to prove us wrong before condemning him, we neve asking Haverford to rescind Birgeneau’s invitation and we did not have the chance to protest silently because Birgeneau d to show up.

Bowen misses the point of commencement protests: Honorary degrees are essentially awards, and commencement protes asking that the award go to someone who deserves it. We hoped that either Birgeneau would show us he was worthy of re honorary degree, or that he would not receive one. Our goals were to defend the honor of Haverford College and act in so the Occupy Cal protesters. Protesting during commencement itself was a last resort to achieve just one of those goals.

Dr. Bowen, where did we go wrong? Is it our success that offends you? Perhaps you would have been happier with our met had failed.

BIO

Michael Rushmore is a recent graduate of Haverford College.



[\(/print/views/2014/05/27/essay-defends-haverford-students-who-protested-commencement-invitation?width=775&height=500&iframe=true\)](/print/views/2014/05/27/essay-defends-haverford-students-who-protested-commencement-invitation?width=775&height=500&iframe=true)

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