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# Honoring Commencement Dissent

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On Sunday, graduating seniors at Haverford College listened while William Bowen, emeritus president of Princeton University and the Mellon Foundation, scolded them about the Birgeneau affair much ballyhooed in the national press.

Bowen used his time before a captive graduation audience to berate student activists as immature, arrogant, and intolerant. Expressing support for protest in principle, Bowen pronounced that protest should only be done in a "proper" manner. Bowen's message was clearly intended to shame and discipline student activists. It also resonated with general media coverage of Haverford's commencement controversy

and similar dust ups at Smith, Rutgers, and Brandeis. Students have routinely been cast as spoiled and narrow-minded, their protests construed as signs of a newly ascendant liberal intolerance. Most disconcerting, student dissent and resistance have been wrongly equated with bigotry and censorship. This latter equation warrants extra scrutiny.

College students are regularly encouraged to become politically aware and empowered. For graduating seniors, college has also been marked by a wave of democratic activism and dissent globally, ranging from the Arab Spring and Occupy Movements to the Indignados Movement in Spain and the Gezi Park protests in Turkey (to offer just a few examples). In the classroom, we study these protest movements and discuss the courage of activists who nonviolently confront intolerant and repressive states. How strange it is, then, to see dissent and protest in this domestic context construed as censorious intolerance. And how disturbing to see the outpouring of public contempt directed toward students who have spoken up on principles of justice and nonviolence.

Let us discuss the category mistakes.

**First, the would-be commencement speakers were not being censored; they were being protested.** It is a crucial distinction. In the case of Haverford, the administration explicitly reaffirmed its invitation to Birgeneau and actively solicited dialogue between him and students even as it acknowledged that protests were a possibility should he come to campus. It was not censorship that kept Birgeneau from campus but rather his own choice, however understandable and regrettable, to avoid further engagement.

**Second, Bowen and other critics have railed against students for being unwilling to listen to different worldviews. This is a misreading.** At Haverford (at least), the commencement controversy has not stemmed primarily from a disagreement over ideas. As it happens, Birgeneau's own ideals appear to be largely in line with much of the community's. Haverford's president, Daniel Weiss, has referred to Birgeneau as "one of the most consequential leaders in American higher education." I have heard no disagreement with that assessment on or off campus. Faculty, staff, and students (including protestors) have in fact widely praised Birgeneau's civil rights record and his educational advocacy for undocumented and minority students.

What's at issue is Birgeneau's alleged role in the violent crackdown on students and other university members during his time as chancellor. In a college where both honor and nonviolence are cherished values, numerous Haverford students have objected to the possibility of granting an honorary degree (and, by implication, honorary inclusion in their community) to an individual who, barely two years ago, played a part in violence against students and teachers who were nonviolently protesting economic inequality and the corporatization of the university (including major tuition increases). This is not bigotry. It is solidarity. It is not censorship. It is dissent. Even if the commencement protests could have been undertaken in a more respectful and dialogical manner, it is not the students who are the current source of embarrassment. This needn't be a sad time for Haverford. It is a time to be proud of students for being politically engaged and empowered enough to express dissent and to stand up for their beliefs and for the principles of nonviolence and accountability that the college itself holds dear.

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