The Power of Student Voices as a Tool for Change

Panelists:

Kenzie Bevington is a student organizer and activist who is getting her BA in law at the University of Arizona. She is the Vice-President of VOX: Voices of Planned Parenthood. She and her fellow reproductive justice advocates do advocacy work in the Tucson community, particularly with the Latinx community in Tucson, around healthcare, voting registration, and comprehensive sexual education. She recently attended the White House symposium; The United States of Women. She is also the incoming Executive Diversity Director of the Associated Students of the University of Arizona. She seeks to improve the experiences of her campuses diverse student body by being an advocate for marginalized students, and has done so by being involved in the creation and continuation of the Marginalized Students of the University of Arizona.

Kevyn Butler is a recent graduate from the University of Arizona School of Dance. As the former Co-President of the Black Student Union, Kevyn created countless events around the intersection of social justice, wellness of the college student, and blackness. For two years Kevyn served over 50 students as the Resident Assistant for the Building Leaders and Creating Knowledge Living Learning Community which focused on first year African American academic outreach, retention, community and cultural engagement. Mr. Butler currently lives in Queens, NY and is pursuing a career in dance.

Mónica Contreras is a University of Arizona alumni where she majored in Mexican American studies and dedicated her time to student organizing. She is involved in M.E.Ch.A., a Chicana/o student activist organization, and is also a strong advocate for migrant rights activism in Tucson. She is the daughter of Mexican immigrants and grew up in Arizona.

Celeste González de Bustamante, Ph. D, is Associate Professor in the School of Journalism at the University of Arizona and an affiliated faculty of the UA Center for Latin American Studies. During the 2013-2014 academic year she was a distinguished visiting professor at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. She is the current head of the Border Journalism Network/La red de periodistas de la frontera, and head of the International Communication Division of the Association for Journalism and Mass Communication. (Moderator)

Madison Steinke is a queer chicana feminist and student activist studying English and Gender and Women’s Studies with an emphasis in Chicana Studies at the University of Arizona. She works in the Women’s Resource Center on campus, where she is area leader of Core Community for the student group, FORCE (Feminists Organized to Resist, Create and Empower). In her work with FORCE, she has contributed to the organizing and facilitation of several social justice discussions and workshops, large scale campus wide campaigns (such as ‘I Will’ week), and large scale UA campus and Tucson community collaborations (such as Slutwalk), all consistent with an intersectional feminist framework.

Agenda for Panel:

Teresa Graham Brett will introduce the panel and Celeste González de Bustamante as the moderator.

Celeste will introduce panelists and start with the following general questions:

1. How did you get started in student organizing? (tell a bit of your story)
2. What values and principles guide your organizing and activism? (both your individual activism and MSUA)
3. How did you implement/carry out your organizing and activism? (individual and MSUA)
4. What challenges did you face and how do you plan to implement activism and organizing in the future?
Student activism is serious business. The protesters at Mizzou and Yale need to be heard, not laughed off.

BY ROXANE GAY
November 11, 2015

Student activism is not new. Sometimes it is misguided, sometimes it’s dismissed, but it is always earnest. In 1960, young black students who had put up with enough and wanted their concerns about racial equality and civil rights to be heard formed the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC. They eventually became the more radical arm of the civil rights movement—leading direct action protests, coordinating the Freedom Rides, and leading voter registration drives. They were passionate. They were provocative. They put their lives on the line and we remember them today as a force in the movement. SNCC showed that young people are an integral part of a participatory democracy and that they deserved to have a seat at the civil rights table.

Whether we agree with these student protesters or not, we should be listening: They are articulating a vision for a better future.

We have new cause to think about student activism, race, and the continuation of the civil rights movement because of concurrent and related student protests at both the University of Missouri and at Yale University. Of late, there has been a lot of talk about college students and their curious ways, about how they are intensely politically correct, overly sensitive, and unduly coddled. Some have suggested that students are frivolous activists, that they no longer have senses of humor, and that liberalism has run amok on college campuses, ruining them in the process. This is a reductive and rather lazy understanding of student activism.

In the protests at Mizzou and Yale and elsewhere, students have made it clear that the status quo is unbearable. Whether we agree with these student protesters or not, we should be listening: They are articulating a vision for a better future, one that cannot be reached with complacency.

Late Saturday night, word spread that Mizzou’s black football players were planning to strike and refusing to participate in team activities, including games. They were the latest to join graduate student Jonathan Butler—who had been on a hunger strike since the prior Monday—and the activist group Concerned Student 1950, in order to force the ouster of University of Missouri system president Timothy Wolfe. The protests ignited because of Wolfe’s inaction and perceived indifference in the face of several racial incidents on the Mizzou campus, including a swastika drawn on a wall in human feces. The students circulated a list of demands: They wanted a handwritten apology from Wolfe, his resignation, the development of a racial awareness curriculum, and the creation of a strategic plan for the retention of marginalized students.
Things moved quickly after the players joined the cause. More graduate students began protesting. Head football coach Gary Pinkel offered his support of the protest with a post on Twitter. On Monday morning, faculty said they were going to participate in a two-day walkout in solidarity with the protesters. Later that day, both Wolfe and R. Bowen Loftin, the chancellor of Mizzou’s flagship campus in Columbia, resigned. Administrators announced a series of initiatives designed to promote a stronger racial climate on campus.

In truth, the tipping point was the black football players denying the university their black labor. They created a financial imperative for the university to enact change: If the Tigers didn’t play their next scheduled game against Brigham Young on November 14, Mizzou would have to pay a $1 million cancellation fee.

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At Yale, the Intercultural Affairs Committee, composed of diversity administrators from across the university, sent students an email before Halloween, imploring them to be more thoughtful about their costume choices—to avoid offensive cultural appropriation or misrepresentation. “Halloween is also unfortunately a time when the normal thoughtfulness and sensitivity of most Yale students can sometimes be forgotten and some poor decisions can be made including wearing feathered headdresses, turbans, wearing ‘war paint’ or modifying skin tone or wearing blackface or redface,” the letter read, in part.

The counsel in this letter may have felt paternalistic, but given how many college students have historically chosen to paint themselves in blackface and otherwise tread upon cultures and common sense, the email was certainly well-intended and not out of the ordinary. Some students complained nonetheless.

Lecturer Erika Christakis, associate master of Yale’s Silliman College (an administrative role essentially equivalent to a dean of student life), wrote an email responding to the students troubled by the IAC’s letter. With willfully detached intellectual curiosity, she argued that it’s fine for students to be students and to make mistakes—for children, in a word, to be children. I wonder and I am not trying to be provocative: Is there no room anymore for a child or young person to be a little bit obnoxious … a little bit inappropriate or provocative, or yes offensive? American universities were once a safe space not only for maturation but also for a certain regressive, or even transgressive, experience; increasingly, it seems, they have become places of censure and prohibition.

Christakis did, however, intentionally misread the letter the Intercultural Affairs Committee sent; the committee did not prohibit anything, nor did it suggest that it wanted to. The organization simply offered suggestions to create for Yale students a better world than the one we live in. Christakis, on the other hand, suggests we take our arguments out of their real-world context—
eliding real people in the process—and instead move them into the realm of the theoretical, where no one can feel hurt.

In the real world, though, we have to question the cost of the transgression Christakis argues for so eloquently, and who will pay the price. For some, these matters are engaging intellectual exercises. For others, they are matters of dignity, emotional wellbeing, and safety. Hundreds of Yale students have not taken kindly to Christakis’s suggestions, protesting her words and calling for the resignations of both her and her husband Nicholas, Silliman College’s master—the principal faculty member “responsible for the physical well being and safety” of students in his residence hall. Neither faculty member should resign or even apologize, but the students are well within their rights to protest the troubling spirit of Christakis’s email.

In The Atlantic, Conor Friedersdorf took offense to some of the people involved in the protest, labeling them intolerant. “They’re behaving more like Reddit parodies of ‘social-justice warriors’ than coherent activists, and I suspect they will look back on their behavior with chagrin,” he wrote, espousing the curious notion that protest should be a polite and demure endeavor that pleases everyone.

I attended Yale from 1992 to 1994. While I was there, I understood that, as a black woman, I was regarded as a usurper on hallowed Ivy grounds. Either I was a scholarship student or a New Haven local—no one could believe that I was there, like the others, simply to learn. It was not uncommon to be the target of racial slurs, to be the subject of whispered discussions about affirmative action, and to tolerate microaggressions on a daily basis. Campus police made a sport of asking me and other black students, to show our student identification cards. My experience was in no way unique.

The currents protests are symbolic of a far more complex problem: a troubled racial climate on Yale’s campus that has persisted for many years. In truth, most predominantly white campuses across the country are similarly plagued. I have spent most of my adult life on college campuses in one role or another, as both student and instructor; regardless of campus, the racial climates were always tense, at best. I am not surprised by what is happening at Yale. I am not surprised by the Mizzou protesters, or by the fervor of their commitment.

We cannot ignore what is truly being said by both groups of protesters: That not all students experience Yale equally, and not all students experience Mizzou equally. These conversations were happening well before these protests, and they will continue to happen until students are guaranteed equality of experience. They are still being forced, however, to first prove that it is worth opening a conversation about either.

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At Mizzou, the banal and predictable backlash has begun. The students have been painted as cowardly babies, bigots, or outright liars by the conservative media. They are ingrates, irresponsible, and, in the case of the football players, men unwilling to meet their obligations. The students’ concerns have been roundly diminished or dismissed. It seems that when it comes to racism, people of color are expected to endure without complaint. We are expected to be grateful for opportunities, like a college education, while ignoring racial aggressions both
great and small. We are supposed to be noble in the face of staggering humiliations. As a student, I was expected to show my ID every single time it was demanded of me and I was expected to pretend it did not hurt. As a faculty member, I am expected to show my campus ID every time it is demanded of me. I may be expected to pretend it doesn’t hurt, but now I refuse to participate in the charade.

There is often condescension in examinations of these supposedly fragile young people who don’t understand the real world. College students do, however, understand the real world, because they aren’t just students: They do not abandon their class background or sexuality or race or ethnicity when they matriculate, and their issues do not vanish when they register for courses. We should not dismiss their valid concerns. To do so, to invalidate their experiences, would be to invalidate their diversity and ignore their hurt. American colleges and universities have always been incubators for the privileged, and the only people who continue to operate there with some guarantee of physical and emotional safety are white, heterosexual men. Is it any wonder, then, that students are demanding a basic guarantee of safety?

The story we cannot forget is that black students at both Mizzou and Yale reached a breaking point. These are students who could no longer endure what had become unbearable. They said, “Enough.”

In Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education, Martha Nussbaum suggests that a liberal education, one designed to “produce free citizens,” should help students connect with their humanity and understand their place in the world. “It would be catastrophic,” she writes, “to become a nation of technically competent people who have lost the ability to think critically, to examine themselves, and to respect the humanity and diversity of others.” Activism is one way students can learn to become the free citizens Nussbaum describes. These are students who could no longer endure what had become unbearable. They said, “Enough.”

Students have protested hikes in tuition, university policies on undocumented students, graduate student stipends and health insurance, predatory professors, sexual violence on campus, and many other issues. Sometimes, students protest provocative speakers, inept athletic directors, and toxic social media sites. They have directed their activism toward both national and global concerns including war and other military interventions, exclusionary legislation, reproductive freedom, racial inequality, and economic inequality. During the height of Occupy Wall Street, smaller Occupy sites began appearing at colleges and universities across the country.

Student activism is widespread, because some students are making the most of their college experience. They understand that this may very well be the last moment in their lives when they can confront real issues in an environment where they are forced to encounter people who don’t look like them, who don’t think like them, environments where change is still possible. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and protestors at campuses across the country including Yale and Mizzou are part of a robust, vital tradition that we should not overlook. Today’s student activists are doing the necessary work to ensure that the next generation that participates in the tradition of student activism will be fighting different battles. Or, perhaps, they are doing the necessary work to ensure that students, of all identities, might have a fighting chance to experience college and life beyond more equally than those who came before them.