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BY DAVID SCHULTZ

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Campus Protests and the Corporate University



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

The murder of the four students who protested the Vietnam War at Kent State University on May 1, 1970, was a tragedy. The suppression of student protests on campuses across the United States in the spring of 2024 is a farce. The latter points to how little college administrators and politicians have learned when it comes to students' speech, thinking that repression is the solution for dissent and disagreement.

The student protests of the 1960s were born of political anger. Students were unable to vote. They lacked a political voice in American elections and politics, and they lacked a voice in the governance of their schools. They demanded a seat at the table, the right to be heard and some control over the institutions that literally dictated their lives. Their demands for a voice

were met with force and repression much in the same way that the civil rights demonstrators who crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge were.

College administrators first ignored student demands. Then they sought to break up the demonstrations with campus police. Politicians such as Governor Reagan in California, and Governor Rhodes in Ohio responded even more forcefully. They, along with President Richard Nixon, sought to capitalize on the protests politically and personally. They made political careers by running against challenges to authority, campaigning as law and order candidates, claiming to speak for the silent majority, and labeling those who dissented as un-American.

A show of force was their solution across college campuses in America. Eventually they called out the National Guard. The tragic result culminated in Kent State. Four Dead in Ohio as sung by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

Colleges and politicians should have learned the lessons of this mistake. The lesson should have been that student voices matter, that students have a right to express their views, and force is not a way to stifle or to address differences of opinion.

They should have also learned that universities are supposed to be socially responsible. They are or have become political institutions, not private corporations. They are socially responsible in the sense that they have responsibility to act ethically and act consistent with their values. Their values include free and open inquiry, disagreement, and debate. They need to be responsible to their stakeholders, including their students, and they need to live up to the democratic ideals and values that they are supposed to be fostering.

But what we learned in the 1960s was that schools were also hotbeds of hypocrisy. That was the source of much of the campus unrest and protest in the 1960s. Instead of fixing the hypocrisy, living up to their values, and respecting student demands, higher education turned corporate. Over a fifty year period schools thought they had learned how to address the dissent on campus. They adopted even more of a corporate structure, seeking a top down mechanism for trying to control curriculum, faculty, and students. They adopted speech and civility codes as a way not to encourage debate but as a tool to discourage views that they do not want to hear.

The corporate university turned itself into a private good, forcing students to borrow tens of thousands of dollars and thereby discipline their behavior by the demands of the economic marketplace. Moreover, the corporate university created its own problem by not being neutral when it came to a diversity of viewpoints, favoring some as opposed to others. It created not a tolerance but an intolerance of certain types of speech. Moreover, as universities

have become even more corporate they have built lofty endowments whose investments are oftentimes questionable and which gives donors outsized influence upon what administrators and professors can do.

Much in the same way that the students of the 60s criticized universities for the defense contracts they took and how universities furthered the Vietnam War, students today criticize endowments for supporting causes and issues of which they do not support. They have legitimate grievances against both the US government's support for a war they do not endorse, and also against universities whom they see as complicit. They demand a voice, call for disinvestment, or simply want to express their disagreement.

Yet again politicians such as Donald Trump and Speaker Mike Johnson are denouncing the protests, calling for the National Guard to quell student speech. Yet again a sitting president seems unable or unwilling to listen to the students. Yet again another war will impact a presidential campaign.

This is more than a tragedy. It is a farce.

David Schultz is a professor of political science at Hamline University. He is the author of [Presidential Swing States: Why Only Ten Matter](#).

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