

# 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 "cosseting 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.