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## 4 Ways to Ease Strife on Campuses

By MARK B. ROTENBERG

UNIVERSITY LEADERS aren't exactly having a pleasant fall semester. The recent well-publicized surge in student protests has not only forced the resignations of high-ranking college officials but also produced demands that university presidents, provosts, and deans are struggling to meet. These demands present serious challenges to leaders who, even if broadly sympathetic to many of their students' concerns, are scrambling to decide what they can do — immediately and concretely — to calm the protesters outside their windows, stay true to core institutional values, avoid scathing press attention and social-media chatter, and save their jobs.

Whether or not colleges are properly viewed as competing suppliers of educational services to student consumers, there is no denying that students have come to understand that university leaders and professors should be accountable to them. Foremost, this includes the students' expectations regarding valuable educational outcomes and employment opportunities, but it also includes particular desires for their college-community experience. The problem is that students' expectations are disparate and inconsistent, emerging from widely divergent cultural, racial, national, and class backgrounds. Many colleges have made tremendous progress in diversifying their student populations, but that very diversity has caused once-settled views about the character of campus life that colleges should offer to be re-examined.

The most expedient course for administrators to follow would be to commend protesters for their concern and activism, agree to their demands, and promise more new training and programs, more faculty and staff diversity, and lots of new funding to tackle the problems they've highlighted. But this brings with it a great risk of overpromising and underdelivering in an environment of scarce resources and increasingly burdensome and costly government regulation.

More fundamentally, it raises the question: What sort of experience are colleges aiming to provide for students, especially since some protesters' demands can be accommodated only at the expense of other goals and principles?

Intellectual honesty requires that demands be dealt with in the broader context of what campus life actually should offer, and with a focus on realistic, not utopian, objectives. Of course, what any particular college should, and realistically can, offer depends on the institution's conception of its mission and its capacity to fulfill it.

But there are some fundamental goals all institutions should consider as they evaluate students' concerns:

- **Assure personal security and equal access to resources.** Every student has a right to be protected from physical harm, abuse, and harassment by others, including fellow students, and to have equal opportunity to benefit from everything colleges offer. This is not simply a legal requirement under Title IX; it is a moral imperative.

- **Provide fair and effective response mechanisms.** Students who feel victimized by discrimination, harassment, or other improper behavior, or, alternatively, are accused of wrongdoing, must be provided fair and effective procedures. Gone are the days when colleges can hide behind poorly articulated, informal means of investigating and adjudicating student complaints and alleged misconduct. But it is unrealistic and unwise for colleges to mimic the civil- and criminal-justice systems in all their myriad details. As the great Yale law professor Grant Gilmore observed, "In hell there will be nothing but law, and due process will be meticulously observed."

- **Prepare students for a multicultural world.** Justice Sandra Day O'Connor suggested in the 2003 University of Michigan affirmative-action case *Grutter v. Bollinger* that student engagement with a multicultural campus community may be not only desirable but essential to quality higher education. "Major American businesses have

made clear that the skills needed in today's increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints," she wrote. Colleges should embrace the opportunity to offer their students that exposure in both formal and informal educational contexts.

- **Protect the marketplace of ideas.** Colleges do their students no favor if they provide an educational experience sanitized of cultural and intellectual ferment, dispute, and discomfort, in which unpopular speakers are censored or barred, and threats or disruptions to their speech are tolerated. The opposite is an essential part of learning and discovery in any academic center committed to real diversity. Serious student engagement with competing intellectual and political perspectives necessarily entails a degree of personal discomfort and self-reflection, and college leaders must emphasize this as a critical component of higher education in their dialogue with student leaders.

The current upsurge in student activism recalls the student protests of the 1960s and 70s, when vital issues of war and peace, gender and racial equality, and student rights roiled campuses nationwide. This current period could also leave a lasting legacy. That is no excuse for bending to every demand. Claims about how universities should evolve to meet the needs and concerns of students in a broadly diverse democracy should not be resolved simply to end a crisis. Rather, college leaders should engage their students and respond to their legitimate concerns with the respect they deserve, candidly and honestly, carrying out those measures that are sensible without sacrificing their institution's abiding educational mission. ■



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