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### **The Unwelcoming Welcome**

“Be quiet!” shouted the Yale student angrily at the professor before her. “It is your job to create a place of comfort and home for the students... you have not done that.” How did the professor provoke such ire? His wife had sent an email opposing the banning of culturally insensitive Halloween costumes. In the email she attributed to her husband the suggestion that, “if you don’t like a costume someone is wearing, look away, or tell them you are offended. Talk to each other.” But the offended students maintained that such a discussion-oriented solution would make them uncomfortable and, consequently, unwelcome.<sup>1</sup> How ought we to respond to such controversies? Should the need for “comfort” and “home” win out over freedom of speech? I contend that this form of “comfort” actually creates an unwelcoming environment for many students, and that a truly welcoming environment must instead embrace free speech. Because of the diversity of views required for universities to function properly, these institutions must cultivate environments where even unpopular opinions are welcomed into the conversation.

Before addressing the notion of “comfort” directly, it is important to consider the context in which it occurs—the university. Why do universities exist? Let us consider the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s mission statement: our “primary purpose ... is to

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<sup>1</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, “The New Intolerance of Student Activism,” *The Atlantic*, last modified November 9, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/the-new-intolerance-of-student-activism-at-yale/414810/>.

provide a learning environment in which faculty, staff and students can discover, examine critically, preserve and transmit the knowledge, wisdom and values that will help ensure the survival of this and future generations and improve the quality of life for all.”<sup>2</sup> The critical examination of knowledge, wisdom, and values seems to imply a need for a diversity of viewpoints and the constant contribution of new ideas. This sentiment was eloquently expressed by Robert M. Hutchins, then president of the University of Chicago, who asserted that “universities exist for the sake of [free] inquiry, [and] that without it they cease to be universities.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, any form of “welcoming” environment created at a university must be compatible with this general purpose.

With this in mind, let us examine more closely the Yale student’s demand for “a place of comfort and home.” In the context of the controversy, her meaning is clear—she desired to be shielded from the expression of viewpoints that offended her. The professor had suggested that she and her compatriots, rather than advocating for the banning of offensive costumes, start a conversation with the individuals engaging in the offensive activity. The two views on costumes would coexist at the university, and arguments from both sides would be weighed in an open debate. But that was deemed an untenable solution by the offended students. They did not want to rebut the offenders’ worldviews—they wanted the offenders silenced and punished by university authorities. And to achieve this outcome, they were willing to protest, berate, and shout down those who proposed otherwise.

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<sup>2</sup> “Mission Statement,” *University of Wisconsin-Madison*, accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.wisc.edu/about/mission/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Statement on the Principles of Free Expression,” *University of Chicago*, last modified July 2012, <http://freeexpression.uchicago.edu/page/statement-principles-free-expression>.

This push for “comfort” creates a highly unwelcome environment for those whose views are offensive to the majority (or a vocal minority). At the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, a Hate Response Team deals with student-reported incidents of bias and hate, vaguely defined as “any non-criminal act motivated, in whole or in part, by the victim's actual or perceived race, religion, ethnic background, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability, or nationality.”<sup>4</sup> In their report from 2015-2016, many of the incidents occurred in classroom settings, and nearly one in three was a “statement” (defined as speech or gestures). Between August 2015 and March 2016, 146 incidents had been reported in total.<sup>5</sup> At Stanford University in 2014, a student group was denied funding by the Graduate Student Council for an event supporting traditional marriage. LGBT students claimed the event would make them feel unsafe, and in response the GSC rejected the funding request.<sup>6</sup> Developments such as these exemplify the hostile environment a focus on “comfort” creates. In protecting some students, a university must stifle others.

“Comfort,” by making dissenting students unwelcome, thus prevents the university from fulfilling its purpose, the critical examination of knowledge. Dissenters are hindered from bringing their ideas to the table, both in the classroom and outside it. What, then, is the alternative? Free speech. Rather than protecting students from viewpoints they find offensive, universities can protect students in their attempts to discuss these ideas. This will undoubtedly lead to some amount of discomfort at various times. But every student

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<sup>4</sup> “Hate/Bias Incident Report,” *University of Wisconsin-La Crosse*, accessed March 3, 2016, <https://www.uwlax.edu/Campus-Climate/Hate/Bias-Incident-Report/>.

<sup>5</sup> “End of Year Reports,” *University of Wisconsin-La Crosse*, accessed March 8, 2016, <https://www.uwlax.edu/Campus-Climate/End-of-year-reports/>.

<sup>6</sup> “GSC denies funding for controversial ‘anti-LGBT’ event,” last modified March 12, 2014, <http://www.stanforddaily.com/2014/03/12/gsc-denies-funding-for-controversial-anti-lgbt-event/>.

will be encouraged to contribute to the university-wide conversation, becoming a welcome part of the intellectual community. Those who feel uncomfortable will be encouraged to speak out, to voice their opinions and formulate strong arguments against those who offend them. And the offending parties will, likewise, be welcome to argue their side. The quest for knowledge and understanding—the heart of the university—will thus continue to flourish through these disagreements.

Ultimately, the contention that to welcome students a university must shield them from offensive ideas is an erroneous one. Any environment where students demand to be shielded from offense will become an environment where dissenters find themselves repressed and silenced. The “comfort” of some will always necessitate the great discomfort of others. This is no way to run a university. The environment cultivated on campus must be a welcoming one in the sense that it allows for and encourages truly free inquiry by all members of the community. Freedom of speech creates such an environment, and must therefore be embraced and protected by any university worth the name.