How colleges should handle student protests

In the 1970s and '80s, Harvard displayed patience and tolerance toward me and other anti-apartheid protesters. That can be a model for today.

By David Goodman Updated May 3, 2024, 3:00 a.m.

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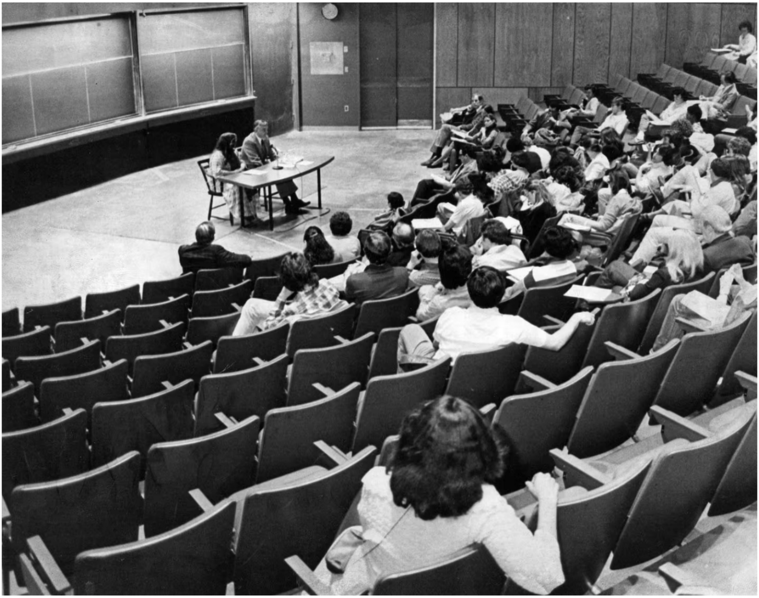
Students protesting apartheid at Harvard on April 23, 1979. BARBARA ALPER/ARCHIVE PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

As someone who participated in campus anti-apartheid protests in the 1980s, I have been shocked by the brutal crackdown on students who are protesting Israel's war in Gaza. Today's Palestinian-solidarity protesters use many of the same tactics as we did in our anti-apartheid demonstrations. But the punitive response by university leaders has been far more severe than anything we experienced.

In April 1978, I had just been admitted to Harvard and was visiting the campus to decide if I would attend. The lectures were interesting, but what most captured my attention was the large shantytown that I visited in Harvard Yard. Built to resemble South Africa's impoverished informal settlements, the shantytown had been erected by students with the newly formed Southern Africa Solidarity Committee (SASC), who were demanding that Harvard divest some $500 million worth of investments from companies and banks doing business in apartheid South Africa.

Inside the encampment, I met students who felt so passionately about social and racial justice that they were willing to camp out indefinitely in front of the office of Harvard University President Derek Bok. They were willing to suffer the consequences, but none followed: Protesters were free to come and go to classes and to interact with curious visitors like me.

I didn't know much about South Africa. But I knew that I wanted to attend college with students who cared deeply about making the world better.



Harvard's president, Derek Bok, addressed a crowd of about 200 people at an open student meeting on April 12, 1979. More than 3,000 students and faculty had signed a petition urging the university to divest itself of stock in companies doing business in South Africa. Bok was opposed to that idea. ED JENNER/GLOBE STAFF

Committed to debate

Divestment protests at Harvard ranged from boisterous to confrontational. In that spring of 1978, 1,000 students rallied in Harvard Yard and confronted several deans after an investment advisory committee declined to endorse divestment. When Bok refused to meet with them, protesters surrounded his office in Massachusetts Hall and he was forced to barricade inside. Others threw themselves in front of a police car that was attempting to whisk him away. Later, students blockaded another administration building, forcing it to close for a day. Bok temporarily relocated his office. He insisted that he did not fear for his own safety but explained, “I’ve been a little bit afraid that my being there may provoke a reaction that may endanger students.”

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By fall 1978, when I started college, nonviolent divestment protests were sweeping campuses around the country. But Bok continued to vigorously argue his case in public meetings with us and other students and in open letters.

One sunny September afternoon during freshman orientation week, I participated in the quaint ritual of having tea with President Bok. He was cradling a teacup, surrounded by a clutch of awestruck freshmen. Was it true, I asked Bok, that Harvard was profiting from apartheid? Bok managed a tight smile. He replied coolly, speaking of the importance of remaining “engaged,” maintaining “dialogue,” and bringing pressure on South Africa from the inside.

I replied that such polite pressure appeared to have no effect on the South African regime, which had recently killed hundreds of students in the Soweto uprising.

Bok, a law professor, believed deeply in the power of logic and reason to win his case. So did I, a cheeky college freshman. Later, I joined SASC, and we held sit-ins at Bok's office. We joined other groups in calling for the creation of a department of Afro-American Studies, closing the college for a day to hold a teach-in. Thirty students (including the woman I would later marry) fasted for 10 days to press for divestment.

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It was all part of a years-long debate about divestment that Bok engaged in with me and other student activists. I figured that this kind of robust exchange of ideas was what college was all about.

And importantly, it wasn't that Bok and other administrators allowed us to keep pressing our case because they agreed with our position. Bok emphatically disagreed with divestment. "Withdrawing is the easy way out," he declared. But he treated us as disagreeable peers to win over, not an enemy to destroy. He acknowledged that some of our arguments were "legitimate" and said, "Apartheid is a perfectly frightful regime and I understand why some students were concerned about it."

The sparring went on for years, well after I graduated in 1983. In spring 1985, SASC invited the Rev. Jesse Jackson to speak at a rally in Harvard Yard in support of divestment. Over 5,000 people attended. The following spring, in the middle of the night, 200 activists erected another shantytown in Harvard Yard, this one capped by a 16-foot-tall "Ivory Tower."

Unlike today's encampments, the shantytowns in Harvard Yard stood for months, not days. Protest simply became part of our educational landscape. Some professors gave lectures in the protest encampment. Harvard Law School Professor Duncan Kennedy reported that his shantytown classes had "higher than normal attendance."

As commencement approached in 1986, Dean A. Michael Spence announced that he would not order the forced removal of the shanties. He wrote, as The Harvard Crimson reported, "Some of you [students, parents, alumni] might disagree with this or other decisions we have taken; however, I trust that you will understand that we have attempted throughout to abide by important principles that ought to guide the conduct of affairs in a university."

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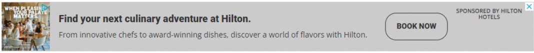
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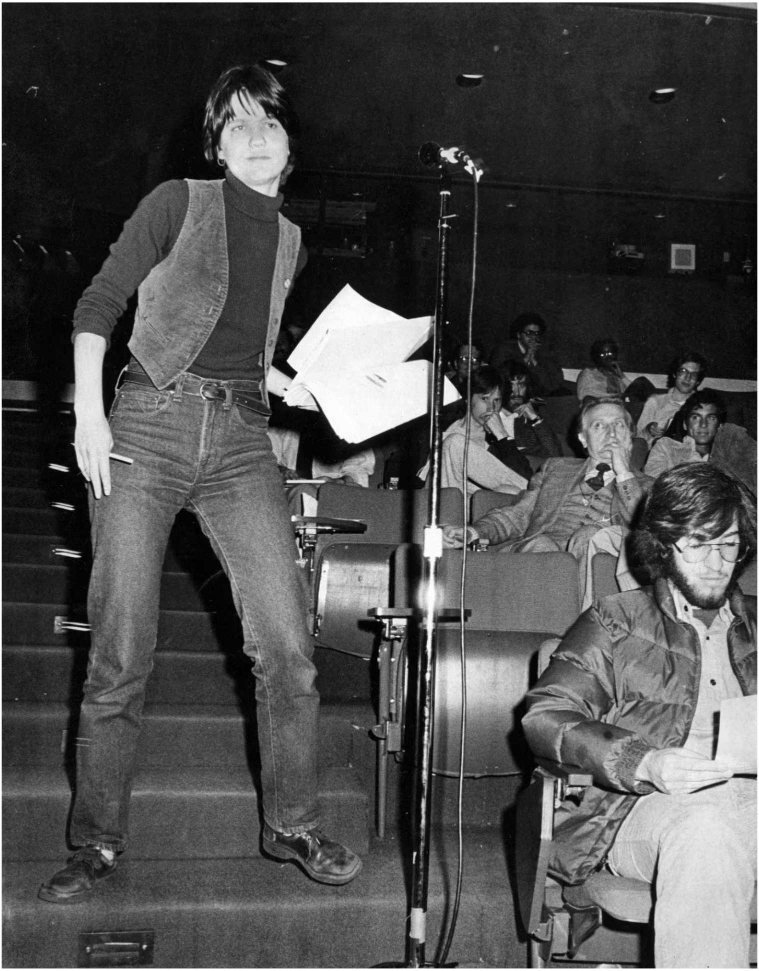
Foremost among those important principles are that a college campus is a sanctuary for the free exchange of ideas, uncomfortable as they may be for some. I never feared that protesting about injustice would cost me my diploma or land me in jail.

To the contrary: Rather than just reading about the world's problems in college, I engaged with them, contributing in a small but meaningful way to South Africa's struggle for democracy. By 1985, Harvard began divesting from South Africa, and within two years, it had cut its South African investments by half. Debate and activism worked.

My activism in college opened my eyes and influenced the direction of my life. After I graduated, I became a journalist and reported from apartheid South Africa, and I later wrote a book about the transformation from apartheid, which began with the election of President Nelson Mandela in 1994.



Emmy Benjamin, representing the Southern Africa Solidarity Committee, spoke while holding the petition to be given to Bok at the meeting on April 12, 1979. ED JENNER/GLOBE STAFF

New protest, similar goals, familiar tactics

At Columbia University in 1985, South Africa divestment protesters blockaded Hamilton Hall, which they renamed “Mandela Hall.” This is the same building that was occupied this week by pro-Palestinian protesters. The difference in the response couldn’t be more stark.

The 1985 blockade of Hamilton Hall — a site of protest dating back to the Vietnam War — lasted three weeks and garnered international attention. Students were free to come and go. Five months later, Columbia became the first major US university to fully divest from South Africa.

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By contrast, the 2024 Columbia occupation of Hamilton Hall ended after two days with police raiding the building and arresting hundreds. Columbia declared that some student protesters would be expelled.

The tolerance of protest in the 1980s resulted in part from the brutal overreaction in the 1960s and '70s, when the presidents of Harvard, Columbia, and other schools sent in police who bashed antiwar protesters. Images of bloodied students — including protesters killed at Kent State and Jackson State — were seared into the national consciousness.

Today, a new generation of students are speaking out against what they see as a grave injustice — Israel's war in Gaza that has killed over 34,000 Palestinians, most of them women, children, and other civilians. In response to the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas that left some 1,200 Israelis dead and took over 250 hostages, Israel has attacked hospitals, killed humanitarian aid workers and journalists, and weaponized food distribution. Palestinians who have survived Israel's bombs are now dying by famine.

Students have refused to look away. They have built encampments to demand that their universities disclose their investments and divest from companies that they say support Israel's occupation of Gaza, including defense contractors Lockheed Martin and Heico, the investment company BlackRock, and Google and Microsoft. Just as in the anti-apartheid movement, the pressure point for activists is financial.

"We are building on the legacy of decades of students who are called for freedom, for liberation, for equality and for an end to apartheid systems across the world . . . for all oppressed peoples," Columbia student organizer Catherine Elias told CNN.

This is what free speech sounds like.

This is not to say that speech should never be limited. There are appropriate restrictions on hate speech, harassment, and incitement, as well as norms around the time, manner, and place that speech can take place. We also took pains in our apartheid protests not to destroy property.

But many schools seem to have forgotten the "principles that ought to guide the conduct of affairs in a university," as Spence, the Harvard dean, put it back in 1986 in explaining why he opted for carrots, not sticks. Back then, Harvard tolerated and engaged student protesters even though the administration disagreed with our cause.

Today, many universities are cracking down on the basic right to peacefully protest, no less to speak freely. According to CNN, at least 2,000 people have been arrested at schools across the country since April 18, many while just occupying open space on a campus. Police have become brutal in some instances, such as at the University of Texas at Austin, where Governor Greg Abbott sent in state troopers who used pepper spray and flash-bang explosives against peaceful student demonstrators. The University of Southern California has canceled its traditional commencement and barred the class valedictorian, a Muslim woman majoring in biomedical engineering, from speaking. She said she wanted to deliver a message of hope. Harvard suspended its Palestine Solidarity Committee and is threatening student activists with unspecified disciplinary action. And Dartmouth tried to preempt protest entirely by threatening students with expulsion if they formed an encampment, which they later did anyway.

Police arrested protesters at Northeastern University on April 27. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Instead of calling the cops against students, some universities still remember what I saw at Harvard in the 1980s: that peaceful protest and continual dialogue are at the core of higher education.

Among the colleges that have rediscovered the art of compromise, Brown University made a deal with its pro-Palestinian protesters: The administration agreed to discuss and vote on divesting funds from companies that support Israel's military occupation. In return, pro-Palestinian protesters agreed to take down their encampment.

Northwestern University negotiated with its student protesters and agreed to greater transparency about its financial holdings, and it will create two faculty positions for visiting Palestinian academics and support five full scholarships for Palestinian students. Protesters did not get everything they wanted — Northwestern did not agree to divest — but the productive dialogue led them to remove their encampment.

And Middlebury College publicly reassured its student protesters that it "values and encourages free expression and the peaceful exchange of ideas — including peaceful protest."

College commencement speakers will soon beseech graduates to make the world better and lift up the downtrodden. But many seats at graduations will be empty because too many student protesters will be suspended or denied their diplomas for caring too much about people suffering a world away.

University leaders should take a lesson from the anti-apartheid movement: Make colleges a place where free speech flourishes, not where it goes to die.

And college activists should also take a lesson from earlier protest movements: Keep speaking up for a more just and peaceful world.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu told us in the darkest days of apartheid, "You know something, we're going to be free. And when we get to the other side of this liberation game, we would like to be able to say '[you were] with us.'"

David Goodman is a journalist and host of The Vermont Conversation podcast at VTDigger. He is the author of "Fault Lines: Journeys Into the New South Africa."