

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Yale and the Puritanism of ‘Social Justice’

Ditching class to protest won’t count against you—at least if the university approves of the cause.

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March 6, 2018

Answering a question about which there could hardly have been much doubt, Yale’s admissions blog said last month the university would not penalize prospective students who are suspended for joining antigun protests in the wake of the Parkland shooting. “Yale will NOT be rescinding anyone’s admission decision for participating in peaceful walkouts for this or other causes.”

So far, so routine. A university like Yale would not ordinarily snatch back an admissions offer just because an accepted senior had skipped a day of class, no matter the reason.

But there’s more. The post’s author, senior assistant director of admissions Hannah Mendlowitz, makes clear that Yale considers participation in such a walkout to be a plus, rather than a subject of indifference.

“For those students who come to Yale, we expect them to be versed in issues of social justice,” Ms. Mendlowitz writes. “I have the pleasure of reading applications from San Francisco, where activism is very much a part of the culture. Essays ring of social justice issues.” Even if applicants from less-fortunate areas of the country cannot be expected to meet the Bay Area standard, the message is clear. The post is titled “In Support of Student Protests.”

This endorsement of activism raises a few questions. Would Yale really turn away a brilliant young flutist, chemist or poet who, while solidly educated in history, religion and government, is not specifically “versed in issues of social justice”? What about students who have pursued courses based on great works of the past? Must they be versed in contemporary views of social justice too? Besides, which causes constitute social justice?

Yale’s admissions blog is eagerly read by high-school students who have not yet applied. What should one advise aspiring Yalies who are not versed in—or worse, not zealous for—the Bay Area ideologies that so please the admissions office?

It might be best not to feign progressive political views in hopes of snagging a coveted Yale slot. That would be insincere, after all. But maybe it would be prudent to conceal any contrasting views.

Suppose a student had been deeply influenced by Friedrich Hayek's "The Mirage of Social Justice." After reading it, she had concluded social justice does not offer a particularly useful "take" on the moral problems of society, and that other standards—justice toward individuals, protection of personal rights, peace and nonaggression, neutral and impartial application of law—are better.

Now suppose she put that in her Yale application, knowing that screeners would be looking for some indication she was "versed in social justice." Would it affect her chances of making the cut?

A similar scenario played out for Hayek, actually. Despite his illustrious career at the London School of Economics, he had trouble finding a suitable berth in American academia and eventually landed in a nonstandard appointment at the University of Chicago through its Committee on Social Thought. His thinking didn't quite fit in, even though it was destined to become immensely influential in several fields.

Yale says it will overlook walkouts "for this or other causes." To test that, an applicant might engage in a peaceful walkout for a cause of which the admissions staff disapproves—say, Second Amendment rights. But what high schooler would want to be that test case?

The issue is of principle, not law: As a private university, Yale is not subject to the First Amendment and need not guarantee applicants a neutral forum. It can set what standards it pleases, including screening out students who march for a not-Yale cause. By contrast, administrators in public high schools are barred from playing favorites, so they can't approve or disapprove peaceful walkouts based on whether or not they approve of the cause.

That being said, Yale started out as a base for the training of Puritan clergy. One wonders whether it has really changed all that much.

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Appeared in the March 7, 2018, print edition as 'Yale and the Puritanism Of 'Social Justice'.'