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Making Protest Count

President Nixon's decision to expand the Vietnam war into Cambodia and the killing of four university students by National Guard bullets have produced a swelling tide of protest that has united many disparate elements on campuses all over the country.

The fury that grips college youth is fed by a conviction that the Administration itself has contributed to the repressive mood that made the Ohio National Guardsmen overquick on the trigger. That conviction has helped reduce undergraduate confidence in the responsiveness of the political process.

Yet it is the ultimate delusion to express shock or frustration through self-defeating violence that simply invites fresh excesses in the name of law and order. And, even without the element of violence, students and faculty build scant general respect for the seriousness of their social concern if their response to political setbacks is to shut down the universities and keep them shut.

There may be point to a day or two-day suspension of classes, by agreement of administration, faculty and students, for serious contemplation of the current crisis and methods of mobilizing the broadest possible support for new policies and priorities.

There is even more point to such planned recesses as the one Princeton University is undertaking next fall when all classes will be suspended for two weeks so that students and teachers may translate their personal idealism into systematic political action in preparation for the Congressional elections.

But a national move toward cancelling the remainder of the academic year, as a demonstration of opposition to the Vietnam war and related policies, is self-defeating and destructive. The universities are precisely the places not to shut down, though unfortunately there may be quite a few people in various strata of American life who would like to see them shut down.

The best way that the academic community can demonstrate that there are civilized roads to a more responsible society is to stay open and concentrate on the effective harnessing of ideas to action. The irrationality of escapism is no answer. It merely leaves the arena to the Philistines.