

Dear Sillimanders:

Nicholas and I have heard from a number of students who were frustrated by the mass email sent to the student body about appropriate Halloween-wear. I've always found Halloween an interesting embodiment of more general adult worries about young people. As some of you may be aware, I teach a class on "The Concept of the Problem Child," and I was speaking with some of my students yesterday about the ways in which Halloween – traditionally a day of subversion for children and young people – is also an occasion for adults to exert their control.

When I was young, adults were freaked out by the specter of Halloween candy poisoned by lunatics, or spiked with razor blades (despite the absence of a single recorded case of such an event). Now, we've grown to fear the sugary candy itself. And this year, we seem afraid that college students are unable to decide how to dress themselves on Halloween.

I don't wish to trivialize genuine concerns about cultural and personal representation, and other challenges to our lived experience in a plural community. I know that many decent people have proposed guidelines on Halloween costumes from a spirit of avoiding hurt and offense. I laud those goals, in theory, as most of us do. But in practice, I wonder if we should reflect more transparently, as a community, on the consequences of an institutional (which is to say: bureaucratic and administrative) exercise of implied control over college students.

It seems to me that we can have this discussion of costumes on many levels: we can talk about complex issues of identify, free speech, cultural appropriation, and virtue "signalling." But I wanted to share my thoughts with you from a totally different angle, as an educator concerned with the developmental stages of childhood and young adulthood.

As a former preschool teacher, for example, it is hard for me to give credence to a claim that there is something objectionably "appropriative" about a blonde-haired child's wanting to be Mulan for a day. Pretend play is the foundation of most cognitive tasks, and it seems to me that we want to be in the business of encouraging the exercise of imagination, not constraining it. I suppose we could agree that there is a difference between fantasizing about an individual character vs. appropriating a culture, wholesale, the latter of which could be seen as (tacky)(offensive)(jejeune)(hurtful), take your pick. But,

and open society.

But – again, speaking as a child development specialist – I think there might be something missing in our discourse about the exercise of free speech (including how we dress ourselves) on campus, and it is this: What does this debate about Halloween costumes say about our view of young adults, of their strength and judgment?

In other words: Whose business is it to control the forms of costumes of young people? It's not mine, I know that.

Happy Halloween.

Yours sincerely,
Erika