It seemed like a good idea at the time. Not so much afterward, when I got driven downtown in handcuffs for spray-painting "Corporate Deathburgers" across a McDonald's. I earned myself a long night in jail for my lack of judgment. But my family and friends — and perhaps most important, my college, the University of Michigan — never learned about the episode. Because in 1985, a college student could get a little self-righteous, make a bad decision, face consequences and then go home, having learned a "valuable lesson."

These days I work as the senior communications officer at another college, where I spend a healthy fraction of my time dealing with students who've made mistakes of their own. I recognize myself in them: intellectually adventurous, skeptical, newly aware of life's injustices. They're also different from me in many ways: less Grateful Dead and Dead Kennedys, much more technology.

That's the important bit. Because for all of the supposed liberating power of their digital devices, they might as well be wearing ankle monitors. Technological connectedness has made it much harder for them to make mistakes and learn from them. Today's students live their lives so publicly — through the technology we provide them without training — that much simpler errors than mine earn them the wrath of the entire internet.

Usually, the outrage is over things they say, for example a campus newspaper editorial that grapples with balancing free speech and appropriate behavior. That's a quandary that has occupied American legal theorists since the founding of the country. It's certainly one any young citizen should think through. But last year, when Wellesley's student paper ran an editorial wrestling with this same idea, it was widely read and criticized in the media as if it were enormously consequential.

Thirty years ago, college students could have tried out radical ideas about limiting free speech in print. The results might have been simplistic or doctrinaire. But readership would have been largely restricted to campus, and the paper would have been in circulation for only a day or two. In this climate, there is little room for students to experiment and screw up. We seem to expect them to arrive at school fully formed. When they let us down by being just what they are — young humans — we shame them.

If a college student spray-painted "Corporate Deathburgers" on a local building today, it wouldn't be hard to imagine someone posting the security footage online. Then the outraged calls and emails and tweets would pour in, demanding that the college disavow Deathburger values. There would be op-eds about the Deathburger problem on American campuses today. And the video would live on: another student weighed down by the detritus of his or her online life.

Technology is a lead actor in this drama, but of course, privilege and power influence how the narrative plays out. Some people are given more learning opportunities than others. I might have been a longhair with spray paint when I got arrested, but the arresting officers also marked me as a white University of Michigan student. Had I been someone else, I might have learned a different lesson. But our response to inequality shouldn't be to strip the privilege of learning from the lucky few who can already enjoy it. We must expand this universal right to develop and grow.

A commitment to learning isn't synonymous with freedom from accountability, and it can't extend into areas like sexual violence or racial hatred. But when it comes to college kids, my worry is that we've become unwilling to tolerate innocent mistakes. Miles Davis left behind a quote that I think captures the beauty of a world in which mistakes are natural or even valued: "It's not the note you play that's the wrong note — it's the note you play afterwards that makes it right or wrong." Our children deserve the opportunity to play the music for themselves.

After reading "The Importance of Dumb Mistakes in College," write an essay between 500 and 800 words in which you argue whether or not Cal Poly has expanded the "universal right to develop and grow" to all its students. If you believe Cal Poly tolerates innocent mistakes and equally affords students the opportunity to develop and grow from them, support your position with compelling arguments that expand upon or go beyond those points already offered in the article. If, instead, you believe Cal Poly is unwilling to tolerate innocent mistakes, or is more tolerant of the mistakes of the privileged and powerful, defend your position with compelling arguments that expand upon or go beyond those points already offered in the article. Your essay should show an understanding of the article without simply repeating it, and you should incorporate specific details from your own experience and knowledge into your response.