



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on May 21, 2013

College Campuses: Wimps Versus Barbarians

An all too familiar scene was enacted on the campus of Swarthmore College during a meeting on May 4th to discuss demands by student activists for the college to divest itself of its investments in companies that dealt in fossil fuels.

As a speaker was beginning a presentation to show how many millions of dollars such a disinvestment would cost the college, student activists invaded the meeting, seized the microphone and shouted down a student who rose in the audience to object.



Although there were professors and administrators in the room — including the college president — apparently nobody had the guts to put a stop to these storm trooper tactics. Nor is it likely that there will be any punishment of those who put their own desires above the rights of others.

On the contrary, these students went on to demand mandatory campus “teach-ins,” and the administration caved on that demand. Among their other demands are that courses on ethnic studies, and on gender and sexuality, be made a requirement for graduation.

Just what is it that academics have to fear if they stand up for common decency, instead of letting campus barbarians run amok? At a prestigious college like Swarthmore, every student who trampled on other people’s rights could be expelled and there would be plenty of replacement students available to take their places. Although colleges and universities across the country have been giving in to storm trooper tactics ever since the nationwide campus disruptions of the 1960s, not all have. Back in the 1960s, the University of Chicago was a rare exception.

As Professor George J. Stigler, a Nobel Prize winning economist, put it in his memoirs, “our faculty united behind the expulsion of a large number of young barbarians.”

The sky did not fall. There was no bloodbath. The University of Chicago was in fact spared some of the worst nonsense that more compliant institutions were permanently saddled with in the years that followed, as a result of their failure of nerve in the 1960s.

When the nationwide campus disruptions and violence of the 1960s gave way to quieter times in the 1970s, many academics congratulated themselves on having restored peace. But it was the peace of surrender.

Creating whole departments of ethnic, gender and other “studies” were among the price of academic peace. All too often, these “studies” are about propaganda rather than serious education. Academic campuses have become among the least free places in America. “Speech codes,” vaguely worded but zealously applied to those who dare to say anything that is not politically correct, have become the norm.

Few professors would dare to publish research or teach a course debunking the claims made in various ethnic, gender or other “studies” courses.



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Why did all this happen? Partly it happened because of the lure of the path of least resistance, especially to academic administrators and faculty. But there was no such widespread surrender to every noisy and belligerent group of student activists prior to the 1960s. Moreover, the example of the University of Chicago showed that surrender was not inevitable.

The cost of resistance to the campus barbarians may not have been the only factor. Resistance requires a sense that there is something worth defending. But decades of dumbed-down education have produced people with no sense of the importance of a moral framework within which freedom and civil discourse can flourish.

Without a moral framework, there is nothing left but immediate self-indulgence by some and the path of least resistance by others. Neither can sustain a free society. Disruptive activists indulge their egos in the name of idealism and others cave rather than fight.

It's not just academics who won't defend decency. Trustees could fire college presidents who cave in to storm trooper tactics. Donors could stop donating to institutions that have sold out their principles to appease the campus barbarians. But when nobody is willing to defend civilized standards, the barbarians win.

Whether on college campuses or among nations on the world stage, if the battle comes down to the wimps versus the barbarians, the barbarians are bound to win.

Thomas Sowell is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305. His website is www.tsowell.com. To find out more about Thomas Sowell and read features by other Creators Syndicate columnists and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate Web page at www.creators.com.

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