

# The Crisis of the University

by George Friedman - May 6, 2024

In my book “The Storm Before the Calm,” I wrote that the United States is headed into institutional and socio-economic crises. The institutional crisis, in my view, would primarily concern the way the federal government functions, but it would also implicate the way universities function. The latter is critical because the university is the arena where future technologists, investors and members of Congress establish the foundations of their knowledge.

On the crisis of universities, I see three issues. One is financial; the cost of education has been unsustainable for individuals and the government alike. (The large number of forgiven loans has compounded this problem.) The second is ideological; ideology has been replacing scholarship in the classroom and in the administration buildings. The third is what I would call procedural; the admissions process has tended to screen out social and ethnic groups that seem unattractive to the university’s idiosyncratic values.

Most relevant to the crisis at the moment is the wave of pro-Palestinian student protests washing over the country, a situation that has inspired counterprotests and forced expensive schools to default on delivering what students had paid or borrowed for: an education.

Many of the protesters have focused on the right to free speech. But the existence of free speech requires a place where ideas can be discussed and used. Thomas Jefferson mentioned this point. There has to be a commons where people can meet and disagree. Free speech of course can be anything, but the essence of it is that statements can be disputed. And the essence of that is the presence of a commons where ideas can be measured. Technology has made the practice obsolete, but not the principle. More important is the moral imperative to allow discordant notes to be heard. Speech that blocks out argument is not, in my thinking, what the founders had in mind. I think they thought of civility and the mutual respect of citizens. It is an unlikely vision but one that is violently undermined at the university. The demonstrators demanded rights that did not include or extend to debate. The Constitution does not demand mutual respect, so the founders’ expectation or hope is not relevant.

But we are speaking of universities where freedom of speech and civility are essential qualities. The university is a place not for unassailable truths but where civil discourse can expand the breadth and

perhaps meld the exchanging of views. In a university, speech must be heard as well as spoken, and the speaker must hold open the possibility that they're wrong.

This is an unlikely event. But it is a goal to be strived for. Universities made no attempt to create the civility that is essential to them. Instead, they allowed howling mobs to claim that their howling was free speech. In other places, it might be. At a university, the standard must be higher. It wasn't. The law may recognize threats and insults as such, but a university should demand more.

Some have compared the demonstrations to the anti-Vietnam War protests. I was in university then, and the demonstrations did not stop the war as many myths claim. The war ended because of adult public opinion and the realization that the war could not be won. It made TV but did not make history.

There is now unease about universities. This is inevitable and will not go away. Is a university education worth the shocking cost to families and governments? Do universities teach students the fundamental principles of civil discourse along with deep knowledge to take them into the world?

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