

Opinions

George Will: Colleges become the victims of progressivism

By [George F. Will](#)

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Colleges and universities are being educated by Washington and are finding the experience excruciating. They are learning that when they say campus victimizations are ubiquitous (“micro-aggressions,” often not discernible to the untutored eye, are everywhere), and that when they make victimhood a coveted status that confers privileges, victims proliferate. And academia’s progressivism has rendered it intellectually defenseless now that progressivism’s achievement, the regulatory state, has decided it is academia’s turn to be broken to government’s saddle.

Consider the supposed campus epidemic of rape, a.k.a. “sexual assault.” Herewith, a Philadelphia magazine [report about Swarthmore College](#), where in 2013 a student “was in her room with a guy with whom she’d been hooking up for three months”:

“They’d now decided — mutually, she thought — just to be friends. When he ended up falling asleep on her bed, she changed into pajamas and climbed in next to him. Soon, he was putting his arm around her and taking off her clothes. ‘I basically said, “No, I don’t want to have sex with you.” And then he said, “OK, that’s fine” and stopped. . . . And then he started again a few minutes later, taking off my panties, taking off his boxers. I just kind of laid there and didn’t do anything — I had already said no. I was just tired and wanted to go to bed. I let him finish. I pulled my panties back on and went to sleep.”

Six weeks later, the woman reported that she had been raped. Now the Obama administration is riding to the rescue of “sexual assault” victims. It vows to excavate equities from the ambiguities of the hookup culture, this cocktail of hormones, alcohol and the faux sophistication of today’s prolonged adolescence of especially privileged young adults.

The administration’s crucial and contradictory statistics are validated the usual way, by official repetition; Joe Biden has been heard from. The statistics are: [One in five women is sexually assaulted while in college](#), and only [12 percent of assaults are reported](#). Simple arithmetic demonstrates that if the 12 percent reporting rate is correct, the 20 percent assault rate is preposterous. [Mark Perry](#) of the American Enterprise Institute notes, for example, that in the four years 2009 to 2012 there were 98 reported sexual assaults at Ohio State. That would be 12 percent of 817 total out of a female student population of approximately 28,000, for a sexual assault rate of approximately 2.9 percent — too high but nowhere near 20 percent.

Education Department lawyers disregard pesky arithmetic and elementary due process. Threatening to withdraw federal funding, [the department mandates adoption](#) of a minimal “preponderance of the evidence” standard when adjudicating sexual assault charges between males and the female “survivors” — note the language of prejudgment. Combine this with capacious definitions of sexual assault that can include not only forcible sexual penetration but also nonconsensual touching. Then add the doctrine that the consent of a [female who has been drinking](#) might not protect a male from being found guilty of rape. Then comes costly litigation against institutions that have denied due process to males they accuse of what society considers serious felonies.

Now academia is unhappy about the Education Department’s plan for [government to rate every institution’s educational product](#). But the professors need not worry. A department official says this [assessment](#) will be easy: “[It’s like rating a blender](#).” Education, gadgets — what’s the difference?

Meanwhile, the newest campus idea for preventing victimizations — an idea certain to multiply claims of them — is “[trigger warnings](#).” They would be placed on assigned readings or announced before lectures. Otherwise, traumas could be triggered in students whose tender sensibilities would be lacerated by unexpected encounters with racism, sexism, violence (dammit, Hamlet, put down that sword!) or any other facet of reality that might violate a student’s entitlement to serenity. This entitlement has already bred [campus speech codes](#) that punish unpopular speech. Now the codes are begetting the soft censorship of trigger warnings to swaddle students in a “safe,” “supportive,” “unthreatening” environment, intellectual comfort for the intellectually dormant.

It is salutary that academia, with its adversarial stance toward limited government and cultural common sense, is making itself ludicrous. Academia is learning that its attempts to create victim-free campuses — by making everyone hypersensitive, even delusional, about victimizations — brings increasing supervision by the regulatory state that progressivism celebrates.

What government is inflicting on colleges and universities, and what they are inflicting on themselves, diminishes their autonomy, resources, prestige and comity. Which serves them right. They have asked for this by asking for progressivism.

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George F. Will writes a twice-weekly column on politics and domestic and foreign affairs. He began his column with The Post in 1974, and he received the Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 1977. His latest book, "The Conservative Sensibility," was released in June 2019. Follow 

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