

Did Stanford Students Just Reject Western Civilization?

Did Stanford students just reject Western civilization? According to the headline of [a Daily Caller story](#) a few weeks ago, they did.

Given what actually happened, that seems grossly exaggerated. But not by as much as some might think.

A few months ago, the conservative campus paper *The Stanford Review* proposed instituting, as part of the standard undergraduate curriculum, [a substantial Western-Civ requirement similar to what had been in place](#) at the university until the late 1980s. That old requirement had been dropped in response to student complaints in the 1980s that its content fostered “racism, sexism, and other perfidious -isms.” The new proposal, however, gained enough signatures among the wider student body to qualify as a “petition” calling for a vote of the entire student body. The duly taken vote was 6-1 against the petition.

Judging from what’s reported in [the raft of stories on the episode](#), it seems that the attitudes leading to that decisive negative vote have only hardened over time. What was, thirty years ago, the view of a vocal minority of left-wing students whose protests the faculty didn’t see reason enough to resist, has now become the regnant orthodoxy among faculty as well as students. The same story could indeed be told about many secular campuses, though not all.

Of course the Stanford vote doesn’t amount to a rejection of Western civilization itself. For one thing, most of the students who uphold the regnant ideological orthodoxy are among Western civilization’s most privileged members. They come from upper-middle-class backgrounds and expect, once they

become professionals of one sort or another, to enjoy at least the same sort of economic and social status as their parents. Others who don't come from that social class attend places like Stanford in order to gain entry to it. Very few students at such prestigious institutions have any intention of eschewing that class and the privileges that go with it.

Why, then, do so many of them seem to believe that a Western-Civ requirement—with its main focus on the writings of the dead, mostly white, and mostly European males who helped build said civilization—fosters all the wrong attitudes?

Well, going by my experience at Columbia, which still retains a similar core-requirement, part of it the resistance to it is purely political. The very idea of “Western civilization” as something to study, absorb, and hand on is considered a preoccupation of “conservatives” and therefore suspect for that very reason.

But I also think something more basic and sinister is going on.

Intellectual Takeout has posted a number of stories describing, and in some cases criticizing, the ever-increasing intolerance of the “politically correct” for dissenting views. Until the late 80s, being “progressive” was associated with favoring free speech and tolerance of diversity of opinion. Not anymore.

As [one story](#) tells it:

“One of the supporters of the initiative [that was voted down] was Miguel Samano, who wrote an anonymous piece supporting the initiative—describing himself as a ‘low-income student of color.’ When he was suspected of being the author, he was dropped from the Stanford First-Generation Low Income Partnership (FLIP).

Then he revealed his identity. Samano is part of a remnant of

Stanford's Western culture programs – a year-long program in the humanities called Structured Liberal Education. He argued that it is 'crucial that marginalized students be willing to interrogate Western thinkers. Avoiding critical thought is shirking responsibility for oneself and one's own politics. I cannot imagine trying to sidestep this critical inquiry.'”

So even when “a low-income student of color” defended the proposal voted down, he was punished.

The basic problem, I suspect, is that many students at Stanford and throughout our system of higher education have absorbed from parents and faculty a hatred for the very civilizational matrix that has nurtured them. Why that is, I leave to readers to think about.