

# The Right Way of Dealing with Campus Protests

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“ The 3 conflict principles are to (1) penalize extreme behaviors, not causes; (2) prioritize people protection; and (3) trade off multiple goals for the highest utility. ”

On this Memorial Day, reports from universities, from Harvard to UC Irvine, deserve our attention. These are some flagships of American’s best colleges and how they handle campus events provides a real life test on their capability of dealing with crisis.

Overall, I would give a low score to all of them, for reasons to be discussed later.

## 1 What Happened at Harvard Last Week

The first report, from the Harvard campus newspaper *Crimson*, shares some immediate background facts behind the now publically announced decision by the Harvard Corporation, the highest governing body of the institution, to deny degrees at the graduation ceremony to 13 undergraduate seniors for participating the campus protest over the war in Gaza — in contrast to the faculty’s recommendation.

Another report, also by the campus newspaper, offers a bigger picture: “The Harvard College Administrative Board — the College’s main disciplinary body — suspended five students and placed at least 20 others on probation for their involvement in the pro-Palestine encampment in the Yard.”

Turns out that the 13 people are out of the 20+, who are graduating this year.

## 2 The Three Conflict Principles

I'm incredibly curious who the disciplinary decision applies to: *everyone* who participated in the encampment, or just a few student leaders?

But even if the discipline targets only student leaders, it could still be seen as excessive. True justice cannot be served by punishing solely based on a student's role in a protest. It has to be based on their actions or behaviors.

The right approach is to differentiate, discriminate and then discipline people based on their *extreme* actions, not every participant. Doing the latter would, as the Harvard student speaker Shruthi Kumar '24 puts it, fall to the "intolerance for freedom of speech and the right to civil disobedience on campus."

More specifically, I would propose three principles for dealing with campus protests:

1. Penalizing behaviors, not causes.
2. Chasing after a multitude of goals, not a single goal.
3. Prioritizing people protection with zero tolerance.

Overall, the successful strategy in dealing with campus protests should follow the same principle as in dealing with any and all conflicts: Isolating, targeting and defeating extreme behaviors but going easy with ordinary participants.

## 3 A Hypothetical Example

Let me use a hypothetical, but not entirely out of context, example to illustrate the three principles above.

We see a peaceful demonstration, on campus or elsewhere. What should the administration do as the first thing after the rally began?

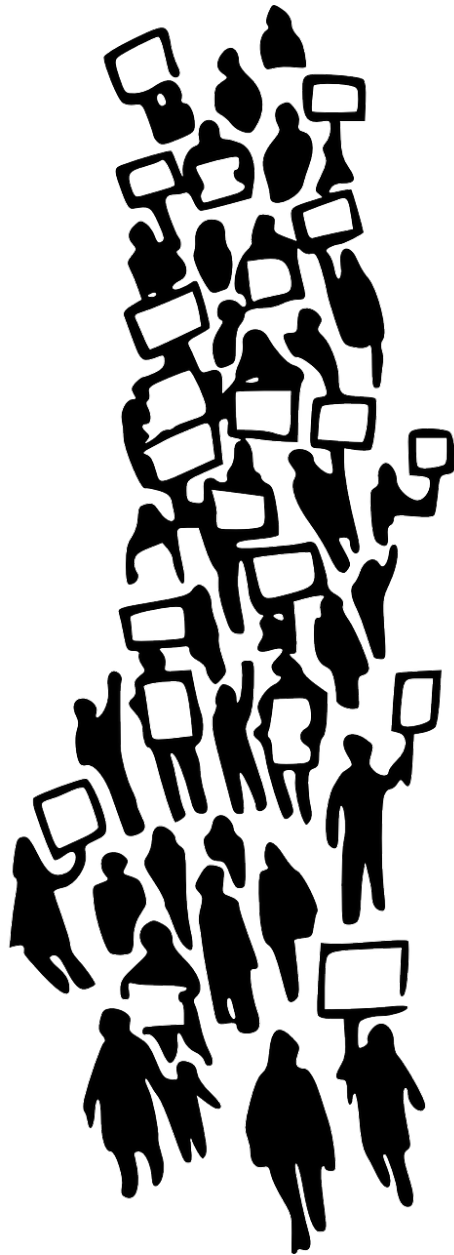


Figure 1: Peaceful Campus Demonstration

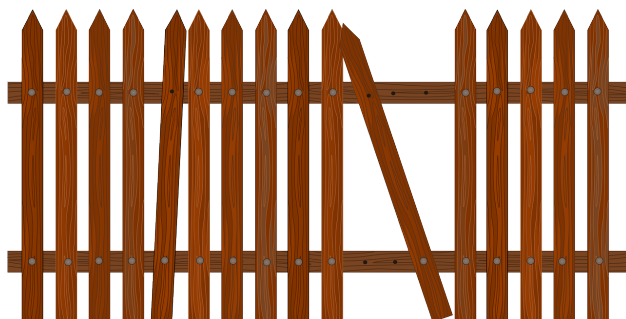


Figure 2: Fence for getting in and out of building

Assuming the demonstrators have tents in front of the campus buildings. Administrators can set up fences by the pathway to campus buildings to protect the right of others who need to get in and out of the buildings peacefully and without any difficulties.

There should be clear signs on the fences that say something like, “This facility is video monitored.” or “Please respect others’ right to enter and leave the building.” And “No entry of demonstrators inside the fenced path.”

These are a more civilized way of avoiding escalated campus conflicts. There is no need to call for police at first, especially city or non-campus police.

Once the fence is there, the first time when a student demonstrator enters the fenced path, or tries to block people from going through, they should receive an immediate and publicized warning (definitely on the same day when that happens), which should be made possible with video CCTV to help identify the offender(s). The warning should only apply to the individual student (or others from outside of campus), not anyone else. The point is to target extreme and unsafe behaviors, regardless of their causes or beliefs.

In the case of a second offense, regardless of whether it’s by the same person or someone new, the administration should report the incident to the police. The decision of whether to arrest the offender(s) then lies with the police.

This is because the first warning serves as public notice, and a repeat offense suggests deliberate action, potentially warranting arrest.

Meanwhile, the administration should enact a zero-tolerance policy against any personal

attacks on campus. Whenever someone verbally or physically assaults another person based on their perceived ethnicity or other identity features, the victim should be encouraged to immediately report the incident to the police department. The police, at their discretion, can then proceed to arrest the attacker(s).

We should send a loud and clear message that holds everyone accountable and puts everyone on the equal footing: You are allowed to express your opinion, preference or cause, as long as you respect others' right of having their way.

## **4 Trade-off of Goals**

We have yet to talk about the second principle of working with multiple goals, I want to use a historical example of a Japanese Emperor to illustrate how different goals can trade off to achieve the highest utility.

Japanese Emperor Hirohito was officially the supreme commander of the military. He approved military operations, including the attack on Pearl Harbor. Those who believed Hirohito was responsible argued that his position demanded accountability for the war's atrocities.

The decision not to charge Emperor Hirohito of Japan with war crimes after World War II was based on a higher cause of keeping Japan stable under the US military occupancy. General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Japan, believed that a cooperative emperor was essential for a smooth occupation. He worried that prosecuting Hirohito would destabilize the country and hinder reconstruction efforts.

The idea is to find what is in the best interest of the country or entity in the long run, and to put it above other goals. For example, freedom of expression and concern for humanity are very good causes, but let us keep in mind there are other causes that sometimes matter more, such as respecting others' freedom and rights.

Having a multitude of goals also indirectly encourages various ways of supporting the same cause. For example, while all the college protests are advocating for diversification of investments

related to Israel, there are more direct means of supporting Palestinians.

One urgent priority is to protect the children of Gaza. Making kid-sized bulletproof vests and helmets and sending them to Gaza could make the difference between life and death. Unlike campus demonstrations, initiatives driven by humanitarian entrepreneurship are unlikely to confront or to offend anyone.