

# The protests at Columbia University

Firms develop expertise in providing the main products that they sell. Toyota excels at making cars, and Apple at making phones.

**Joe McGarrity**



Luckily, most firms do not continue to make this mistake for long. For example, we all know that Kroger excels at providing groceries. Years ago, its West Conway store devoted significant floor space to the furniture it wished to sell. Unfortunately for Kroger, it had no expertise in selling furniture. I am sure it began losing money on this venture. If these losses were great enough, they could have jeopardized the store's survival. It never came to that; once the store realized that it was not making money on its furniture, it stopped selling furniture and devoted its floor space to something else that would be more profitable.

Columbia University seems to

be making the same mistake that Kroger did. Columbia provides a world-class education – so much so that it is counted among the elite Ivy League schools. Just as Kroger provides a high-quality grocery shopping experience, Columbia provides a high-quality educational experience. And unfortunately, just as Kroger dabbled in selling furniture, Columbia has begun to see itself as a site for people to protest and air their political grievances.

Columbia performs this later function poorly and providing it is a mistake – a much worse mistake than Kroger made by selling furniture. Kroger just took some of its extra floor space and put furniture on it. This decision did not impact its grocery shoppers. Kroger still provided food in other parts of the store. The people who bought furniture did not interfere with the grocery shoppers.

If Columbia were to limit its mistake, so that it was no more serious than the mistake Kroger made, it would have allowed protests in an unused part of campus. The protesters could march and shout all day without interfering with the educational services the school provides. Unfortunately, Columbia made a much worse mistake than Kroger

did. It allowed protesters to occupy central portions of campus and created an atmosphere that caused the school's administration to cancel in-person classes and have these classes taught via Zoom. As time passed, the protesters took additional steps that hindered the school's ability to provide high-quality education. Protesters took over a building and barricaded themselves inside. While the protesters held the building, the school was longer able to use it to help fulfill its mission of educating students.

Think about what was going on Columbia's campus. Its ancillary service (providing space for protesters) was harming its ability to supply its main function (providing education), one that it performs exceptionally well. Columbia's recent problem stems from poor management. Its leaders lost track of the common-sense position that it should focus on providing education, a service it excels at providing. Its leaders should also avoid providing other services, like providing space for protesters, that hamper its ability to educate its students.

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