IDEAS

Higher Education Isn't the Enemy

Those who threaten academic freedom, from outside or inside campus, are threatening higher education itself—to America's peril.

By Robert E. Rubin

Illustration by The Atlantic

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I'VE SPENT MORE than five decades making difficult decisions in finance, government, business, and politics. Looking back, what most prepared me for the life I've led was the open exchange of ideas that I experienced in college and law school, supported by a society-wide understanding that universities and their faculty should be allowed to pursue areas of study as they see fit, without undue political or financial pressure. More broadly, throughout my career, I have seen firsthand the way America's higher-education system strengthens our nation.

I cannot recall a time when the country's colleges and universities, and the wide range of benefits they bring, have faced such numerous or serious threats. Protests over Gaza, Israel, Hamas, and anti-Semitism—and the attempt by certain elected officials and donors to capitalize on these protests and push a broader anti-higher-education agenda—have been the stuff of daily headlines for months. But the challenges facing colleges and universities have been building for years, revealed in conflicts over everything from climate change and curriculum to ideological diversity and academic governance.

But there is a threat that is being ignored, one that goes beyond any single issue or political controversy. Transfixed by images of colleges and universities in turmoil, we risk overlooking the foundational role that higher education plays in American life. With its underlying principles of free expression and academic freedom, the university system is one of the nation's great strengths. It is not to be taken for granted. Undermining higher education would harm all Americans, weakening our country and making us less able to confront the many challenges we face.

HE MOST RECENT upheavals on American campuses—and the threat posed to the underlying principles of higher education—have been well documented.

were threatening anyone's physical safety or disrupting the functioning of the university environment, but rather, it seems, because of their opinions. The University of Southern California, for example, recently canceled its valedictorian's speech at graduation. Although administrators cited safety concerns, many on campus, including the student herself, said they believe that the true cause lay in the speaker's pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel views. One does not have to agree with the sentiments being expressed by a speaker in order to be troubled by the idea that they would be suppressed because of their content.

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In other cases, it is the demonstrators themselves who have sought to force their views on others—by breaking university policies regarding shared spaces, occupying buildings, and reportedly imposing ideological litmus tests on students seeking to enter public areas of campus. Some activists have advocated violence against those with whom they disagree. Even before the unrest of recent weeks, I had heard for many years from students and professors that they felt a chilling effect on campuses that rendered true discussion—including exchanges of ideas that might make others uncomfortable—very difficult.

Even as free speech faces serious threats from inside the campus, academic freedom is under assault from outside. To an unprecedented degree, donors have involved themselves in pressure campaigns, explicitly linking financial support to views expressed on campus and the scholarship undertaken by students and faculty. At the University of Pennsylvania, one such effort pressed donors to reduce their annual contribution to $1 to protest the university's decision to host a Palestinian literary conference. At Yale, Beverly Gage, the head of the prestigious Brady-Johnson Program in Grand Strategy, felt compelled to resign after the program came under increasing pressure from its donors. Among other things, the donors objected to an op-ed by an instructor in the program headlined "How to Protect America From the Next Donald Trump."

academic freedom. On a Zoom call whose content was subsequently leaked, a Republican member of Congress, Jim Banks of Indiana, characterized recent hearings with the presidents of Harvard, MIT, Penn, and Columbia—along with upcoming ones with the presidents of Rutgers, UCLA, and Northwestern—as part of a strategy to "defund these universities." In a recent campaign video, former President Trump asserted that colleges are "turning our students into Communists and terrorists and sympathizers," and promised to retaliate by taxing, fining, and suing private universities if he wins a second term. Senator J. D. Vance of Ohio, a close ally of Trump's, has introduced a bill that would punish schools that don't crack down on demonstrators. The bill would tax the endowment of such schools heavily and curb their access to federal funds.

The methods of these donors and politicians—politically motivated subpoenas and hearings, social-media pressure campaigns, campaign-trail threats—may not violate the First Amendment. They do, however, seek to produce a chilling effect on free speech. The goal of these efforts is to force universities to bow to outside pressure and curtail the range of ideas they allow—not because scholars at universities believe those ideas lack merit, but because the ideas are at odds with the political views of those bringing the pressure.

All of this needs to be seen against a foreboding backdrop. At a time when trust in many American institutions is at an all-time low, skepticism about higher education is on the rise. Earlier this year, a noteworthy essay by Douglas Belkin in *The Wall Street Journal* explored "Why Americans Have Lost Faith in the Value of College." *The New York Times* wondered last fall whether college might be a "risky bet." According to Gallup, confidence in higher education has fallen dramatically—from 57 percent in 2015 to 36 percent in 2023. The attacks on free expression and academic freedom on campus are both causes and symptoms of this declining confidence.

It is ironic that, at a moment when higher education faces unprecedented

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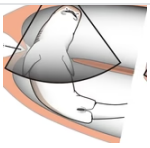
a college diploma. When I graduated from college, in 1960, only 8 percent of Americans held a four-year degree. Today, that number has increased almost fivefold, to 38 percent. Even so, I suspect that many Americans don't realize just how exceptional the country's university system actually is. Although the United States can claim less than 5 percent of the world's population, it is home to 65 percent of the world's 20 highest-ranked universities (and 28 percent of the world's top-200 universities). Americans can get a quality education at thousands of academic institutions throughout the country.



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Despite the skepticism in some quarters about whether a college degree is really worth it, the financial benefits of obtaining a degree remain clear. At 25, college graduates may earn only about 27 percent more than high-school-diploma holders. However, the college wage premium doubles over the course of their lifetime, jumping to 60 percent by the time they reach age 55. Looking solely at an individual's financial prospects, the case for attending college remains strong.

David Deming: The college backlash is going too far

But the societal benefits we gain from higher education are far greater—and that's the larger point. Colleges and universities don't receive tax exemptions and public funds because of the help they give to specific individuals. We invest in higher education because there's a broad public purpose.

engines of economic growth. Higher graduation rates among our young people lead to a better-educated workforce for businesses and a larger tax base for the country as a whole. Institutions of higher education spur early-stage research of all kinds, create environments for commercializing that research, provide a base for start-up and technology hubs, and serve as a mentoring incubator for new generations of entrepreneurs and business leaders. In many communities, especially smaller towns and rural areas, campuses also create jobs that would be difficult to replace.

The importance of colleges and universities to the American economy will grow in the coming decades. As the list of industries that can be automated with AI becomes longer, the liberal-arts values and critical-thinking skills taught by colleges and universities will become only more valuable. Machine learning can aid in decision making. It cannot fully replace thoughtfulness and judgment.

Colleges and universities also help the United States maintain a geopolitical edge. We continue to attract the best and brightest from around the world to study here. Although many of these students stay and strengthen the country, many more return home, bringing with them a lifelong positive association with the United States. When I served as Treasury secretary, I found it extremely advantageous that so many of my foreign counterparts had spent their formative years in the U.S. That's just as true today. In many instances, even the leadership class in unfriendly countries aspires to send its children to study here. In a multipolar world, this kind of soft-power advantage matters more than ever.

At home, higher education helps create the kind of citizenry that is central to a democracy's ability to function and perhaps even to survive. This impact may be hard to quantify, but that doesn't make it any less real.

It is not just lawmakers and executives who must make difficult decisions in the face of uncertainty. All of us—from those running civil-society groups that seek to influence policy to the voters who put elected leaders in office in the first place—are called upon to make hard choices as we live our civic lives. All of us are aware that the country is not in its best condition—this is hardly news. Imagine what that condition

disciplined thinking and the free exchange of ideas.

Of course, there is much about higher education that needs fixing. Precisely because colleges and universities are so valuable to society, they should do more to engage with it. Bringing down costs can help ensure that talented, qualified young people are not denied higher education for financial reasons. Being clear about the principles and policies regarding the open expression of views—even as we recognize that applying them may require judgment calls, and that it is crucial to protect student safety and maintain an environment where learning and research can be conducted—would help blunt the criticism, not always made in good faith, that universities have an ideological agenda. Communicating more effectively with the public would help more Americans understand what is truly at stake.

But the fact that universities can do more does not change a basic fact: It is harmful to society to put constraints on open discussion or to attack universities for purposes of short-term political gain. Perhaps some of those trying to discourage the open exchange of ideas at universities believe that we can maintain their quality while attacking the culture of academic independence. I disagree. Unfettered discussion and freedom of thought and expression are the foundation upon which the greatness of our higher-education system is built. You cannot undermine the former without damaging the latter. To take one recent example: After Governor Ron DeSantis reshaped Florida's New College along ideological lines, one-third of the faculty left within a year. This included scholars not only in fields such as gender studies, which many conservatives view with distaste, but in areas such as neuroscience as well.

We can have the world's greatest higher-education system, with all of the benefits it brings to our country, or we can have colleges and universities in which the open exchange of views is undermined by pressure campaigns from many directions. We can't have both.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

the Treasury under President Bill Clinton. He was a member of the Harvard Corporation from 2002 to 2014.

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