

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

# The Authoritarian Endgame on Higher Education

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When a political leader wants to move a democracy toward a more authoritarian form of government, he often sets out to undermine independent sources of information and accountability. The leader tries to delegitimize judges, sideline autonomous government agencies and muzzle the media. President Vladimir Putin of Russia has done so over the past quarter-century. To lesser degrees, Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey recently have as well.

The weakening of higher education tends to be an important part of this strategy. Academic researchers are supposed to pursue the truth, and budding autocrats recognize that empirical truth can present a threat to their authority. “Wars are won by teachers,” Mr. Putin has said. He and Mr. Erdogan have closed universities. Mr. Modi’s government has arrested dissident scholars, and Mr. Orban has appointed loyal foundations to run universities.

President Trump has not yet gone as far to impede democracy as these other leaders, but it would be naïve to ignore his early moves to mimic their approach. He has fired government watchdogs, military leaders, prosecutors and national security experts. He has sued media organizations, and his administration has threatened to regulate others. He has suggested that judges are powerless to check his authority, writing on social media, “He who saves his Country does not violate any Law.”

Mr. Trump’s multifaceted campaign against higher education is core to this effort to weaken institutions that do not parrot his version of reality. Above all, he is enacting or considering major cuts to universities’ resources. The Trump administration has

announced sharp reductions in the federal payments that cover the overhead costs of scientific research, such as laboratory rent, electricity and hazardous waste disposal. (A federal judge has issued a temporary restraining order against those cuts.) Vice President JD Vance and other Republicans have urged a steep increase of a university endowment tax that Mr. Trump signed during his first term. Together, these two policies could reduce the annual budgets at some research universities by more than 10 percent.

Mr. Trump is squeezing higher education in other ways too. The Education Department let go of about half its work force, potentially making it harder for students to receive financial aid. The virtual elimination of the U.S. Agency for International Development led to the cancellation of \$800 million in grants to Johns Hopkins alone. On March 7, the administration targeted a single university, announcing that it would end \$400 million in grants to Columbia as punishment for its insufficient response to campus antisemitism.

**We understand why** many Americans don't trust higher education and feel they have little stake in it. Elite universities can come off as privileged playgrounds for young people seeking advantages only for themselves. Less elite schools, including community colleges, often have high dropout rates, leaving their students with the onerous combination of debt and no degree. Throughout higher education, faculty members can seem out of touch, with political views that skew far to the left.

Mr. Trump and his advisers are tapping into public dissatisfaction with real problems at universities. But as is the case with their approach to trade, government waste, immigration policy and European military spending, many of their would-be solutions will not solve the underlying problems or will create new ones. The American higher education system, for all its flaws, is the envy of the world, and it now faces a financial squeeze that threatens its many strengths — strengths that benefit all Americans.

Chief among them is its global leadership in medical care and scientific research. American professors still dominate the Nobel Prizes. When wealthy and powerful people in other countries face a medical crisis, they often use their connections to get an appointment at an American academic hospital. For that matter, some of the same Republicans targeting universities with budget cuts seek out its top medical specialists when they or their relatives are ill.

American leadership in medical and scientific research depends on federal money. Private companies, even large ones, typically do not conduct much of the basic research that leads to breakthroughs because it is too uncertain; even successful experiments may not lead to profitable products for decades. Mr. Trump's planned funding cuts are large enough to force universities to do less of this research. The list of potential forgone progress is long, including against cancer, heart disease, viruses,

obesity, dementia and drug overdoses. And there will be costs beyond the medical sector. There is a reason that Silicon Valley sprang up next to a research university.

The nonfinancial parts of the administration's campaign against higher education are also alarming. Last weekend, immigration officers arrested Mahmoud Khalil, a leader of pro-Palestinian demonstrations at Columbia who holds a green card and is married to an American citizen. The government has offered no evidence that he broke the law. Even many legal scholars who reject his views on Israel and Hamas consider his arrest to be a dangerous violation of free speech principles, and we share this concern. Mr. Trump described Mr. Khalil's detention as "the first arrest of many to come," a sign that the president wants to chill speech among the many immigrants on university campuses.

**What is the most** effective response to Mr. Trump's campaign against universities? For people outside higher education, this is a moment to speak publicly about why universities matter. They promote public health, economic growth and national security. They are the largest employers in some regions. They are an unmatched, if imperfect, engine of upward mobility that can alter the trajectory of entire families.

For people in higher education, this is a moment both to be bolder about trumpeting its strengths and to be more reflective about addressing its weaknesses. About those shortcomings: Too many professors and university administrators acted in recent years as liberal ideologues rather than seekers of empirical truth. Academics have tried to silence debate on legitimate questions, including about Covid lockdowns, gender transition treatments and diversity, equity and inclusion. A Harvard University survey last year found that only 33 percent of graduating seniors felt comfortable expressing their opinions about controversial topics, with moderate and conservative students being the most worried about ostracization.

"The insularity of American academia is appalling," said Michael Roth, the president of Wesleyan University. "It has led to massive resentment against intellectual elites." This insularity does not justify Mr. Trump's policies, but it does help explain the dearth of conservatives defending universities today. Universities will be in a stronger long-term position if they recommit themselves to open debate.

As for trumpeting the sector's strengths, the leaders of American higher education have been largely timid and quiet in the face of the Trump onslaught. "The people who are attacking higher education are talking nonstop," said Holden Thorp, a chemist and former university administrator who runs the Science family of journals. "And the people leading higher education are not saying very much." (Mr. Roth, a frequent critic of the administration, is an exception.) University presidents seem to be hoping that if they keep their heads down, the threat will pass — or at least pass by their campuses. They are unlikely to be so fortunate.

In Mr. Trump's first term, administrators and professors sometimes made the opposite mistake and commented on political issues about which they had little expertise. College presidents do not need to become pundits. But they do need to defend the core mission of their institutions when it is under attack. University leaders would help themselves, and the country, by emerging from their defensive crouches and making a forthright case for inquiry, research, science and knowledge.

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