

Universities are not political prizes

Institutions of higher education are valued by democracies because of their civic goal—to foster in the next generation of citizens a regard for individual freedoms and rights, principled debates, and tolerance for opposing opinions. The leaders of these institutions are expected to demonstrate their commitment to these values by supporting academic freedom—the ability of faculty, staff, and students to challenge wisdom, explore new ideas, and advance knowledge through free inquiry. But lately, some university administrators have been responding to the ever more polarized political climate by giving lip service to academic freedom while playing politics—either ignoring or playing both sides of conflicts that threaten to undermine the very tradition of free and diverse thinking and discourse.

Given the polarized political environment in the United States, tensions over the content of university classes, research, and speakers have only escalated.

These problems exist because of, or are made worse by, university administrators who pretend that all is well while they are actually being attacked under the radar. Take the recent incident involving the University of Florida (UF), which blocked liberal professors from testifying as experts in a lawsuit that challenged the state's voting laws. The university rationalized that as a public institution, it must remain neutral when the real reason was that it didn't want

to anger political overlords. Last month, UF reversed its decision after a public outcry by its stakeholders, particularly when it was discovered that other professors had been quietly muzzled. It would have made more sense for UF to acknowledge the potential pressure to comply with the state's conservative administration up-front while making clear that its professors are free to “speak truth to power” when called upon, sticking to its commitment to academic freedom. It is a mistake for scientists to ascribe tensions over academic freedom to the world of the humanities and qualitative social sciences, because limiting academic freedom in one discipline has implications for all of academia. Administrators at UF recently insisted that a new degree not include the word “critical,” a word that is just as important to humanists as “evolution” is to scientists.

As a former university chancellor and provost, I know that university administrators must constantly try to please two different audiences—a generally liberal faculty and generally conservative alumni. When they speak to alumni, they tell heart-tugging stories about students who were transformed by higher education, celebrate athletic success, and laud life-saving advances developed on their campus. When they talk to the faculty, they emphasize how the generosity of the alumni and positive performance of the endowment are bringing new resources to scholarship and teaching. Rarely does it come up that one audience skews conservative and the other skews liberal. When a contentious issue arises, such as a conflict over an invited speaker, presidents tend to grit their teeth and adjust their responses to match the mindset of their audience. Through this “code-switching,” they tell alumni concerned with the so-called “woke left” about the few conservative faculty and speakers who successfully gave

their talks. They tell the faculty about the importance of academic freedom. Both audiences can be mollified for a while, but when an incident occurs that brings the conflict into the open, the tension is exacerbated by having been swept under the rug earlier.

University administrators should stop playing both sides. It's antithetical to the freedom of thought and constructive dialogues that should percolate throughout the campus.

A more forthright approach would allow college presidents to say, for example, “I disagree with this person but believe the university should be a place where they can speak.” The stammering and decision reversals, like what we just witnessed by UF, just breeds suspicion from both sides.

Academic freedom is fragile. We need university leaders to stop taking steps to avoid offending alumni, trustees, and political figures because it undermines their own institutions. Some truth serum and a more direct approach won't solve all the problems for college presidents—and may even lead to some losing their jobs—but more transparency about their views is a step toward preserving universities as highly trusted institutions by all communities. Universities are not cults or political prizes. It's time for their leaders to explain that in simple and clear terms.

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