



SAVING ACADEMIA FROM ITSELF

Concrete Steps to Restoring Academic Freedom

By Asaf Romirowsky and Alex Joffe



Background

You hardly need to be a professor to realize academia has gone badly astray. How American institutions went from the free and unfettered exchange of ideas to being the sites of overt support for terror groups is a question for politicians and future historians. But as faculty members, lawmakers, students, parents, and other stakeholders are struggling to address some of the most pressing problems on campus, it helps to have clear guidelines on how to move forward.

This is especially true for departments of Middle Eastern studies, where, in recent decades, language instruction declined and cultural explanations for American culpability expanded. Given the enthusiasm for Hamas and Gaza currently displayed by a vocal minority within academia, self-examination seems unlikely. If anything, faculty show signs of digging in its "resistance" to President Trump. It is long past time to rebuild universities by acknowledging the monumental losses incurred by encouraging social activism to overwhelm and eventually replace intellectual inquiry. A university worthy of prestige should open the mind rather than close it with slogans, boycotts, or barriers.



Government's Next Steps

How might we begin to reform our universities? A few immediate steps come to mind:

- The Department of Justice should take over civil rights investigations of universities that have allowed pro-Hamas protesters to deprive Jewish, Israeli, and other students of their rights from the Department of Education. Foreign students who are shown to have violated the law, including depriving American citizens of their rights, should be expelled and deported;
- The Office of Management and Budget, as well as the Department Of Government Efficiency (DOGE) should announce investigations of DEI-related policies past and present to understand the misuse of funds and violations of new federal guidelines;
- Congress should continue public hearings on university policies related to DEI and antisemitism. Biased hiring and firing, as well as promotion and tenure policies, should be exposed to the public, along with the ideological content that passes for education;
- Following DOGE's lead, Congress should impose transparency on all aspects of federally funded universities, especially the massive growth of administrative costs that constitute looting by middle and upper management;
- Law enforcement should investigate the connections between the massive U.S. Muslim Brotherhood infrastructure (Council on American-Islamic Relations and others) and campus pro-Hamas protests. Foreign funding of these organizations should be investigated and prosecuted;
- The White House and Congress must act to curb Qatari influence on campus, which includes covertly funding programs to the tune of billions, including in K-12 education;
- Pro-Hamas foundations and dark money funds, such as the Tides Foundation and Arabella Advisors, should be investigated and, if appropriate, stripped of tax-exempt status, along with pro-Hamas and pro-Chinese Communist Party groups such as the People's Way and Code Pink.
- The tax code should be revised to eliminate the dodge of "fiscal sponsorship" that allows front groups such as WESPAC to transfer funds to National Students for Justice in Palestine while the true donors remain anonymous.



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What Universities Can Do

Consistent with this, practical and procedural changes must be demanded from universities that receive public funds, including:

- Universities should be required to publish detailed explanations of their administrative structures, including the rules and organization for faculty hiring and firing, promotion and tenure, internal funding, and academic governance. Any institution that receives federal funding must be completely transparent about how it spends those funds and how it operates. Everything except perhaps the most sensitive personnel procedures should be open to public oversight;
- University trustees must assert control over key processes, above all admissions. The progressive chain starts in admissions, and everyone involved should be replaced with people who are aligned with the university mission;
- Student governments, a key node in funding Hamas supporters on campus, should be cut off from university-collected funds. Student activity fees represent a diversion of student (and, to some extent, federal in the sense of loans and grants) funds over which students have no say. Clubs and other organizations should be self-funded;
- University and foundation endowments should be taxed. Tax exemption is a mid-20th-century innovation that is an explicit public subsidy to institutions. This has already been proposed in the upcoming Congressional budget reconciliation bill.



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Breaking the echo chamber of faculty and graduate students is critical. Aligning faculty with the philosophical and pedagogical goals of the institution is key — namely, a revised vision of the liberal arts and sciences and explicitly not the idea of "scholar-activism." This is, of course, a long-term project. Changes should include:

- Graduate admissions everywhere should be halted or dramatically limited pending overall budgetary reassessments, including regarding federal funding. Underperforming graduate students should be removed. Promising graduate students should be given clear time limits on degree completion and supported until they do so without them needing to be exploited as a subaltern teaching cadre to survive;
- The “fellow to faculty” pipeline that has been funded by universities and wealthy foundations must be eliminated. Circumventing normal faculty hiring and promotion procedures with the implicit goal of replacing existing faculty with ‘diverse’ and underrepresented groups exclusive of merit has palpably changed the nature of pedagogy, research, and demographics. It has also had predictable effects in further marginalizing contingent faculty;
- Right-size the ratio of all faculty to students through retirements and buyouts. Return faculty to their primary teaching roles and end the indentured servitude of graduate students and adjuncts. Graduate student unions would become unnecessary. This will entail reducing research expectations;
- Tenure should be ended and replaced with fixed-duration contracts that are renewable upon review;
- Middle and upper level management must be ruthlessly reduced in size and scope. The bloat is now such that some institutions have more administrators than students, managing self-created mandates that entail more administrators and support staff. With scores of college presidents earning over a million dollars per year, and billions spent on thousands of DEI personnel and their mandates, the entire structure of university administration is unsustainable and demands reform;
- Create three year bachelors degree programs, both by paring down the requirements in certain fields as students declare their major from the outset and by utilizing summer sessions. Shortening the time necessary for a degree saves money, utilizes facilities more fully, and gets motivated students into their chosen professions sooner.



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Conclusion

Even more ambitious changes should be considered. These include fully separating research and teaching units in STEM and biomedical fields. Spinning off independent laboratories would formalize many structures that already exist, for example where faculty use grant money to buy out of teaching responsibilities. Eliminating varsity sports would save money and eliminate the accompanying corruption of pedagogy.

Most fundamentally, the U.S. desperately needs to reevaluate what a university is and what it is for. Five decades of universities striving for relevance has had the effect of politicizing the humanities and social sciences. But as faculties have become politically monolithic, students interested in exploring traditions and themselves have been alienated, causing a feedback loop of shrinking disciplines and intensifying politics. A utilitarian vision of the university as a place to acquire skills now dominates. The most popular majors are business and health professions. Majors aimed at personal growth, such as art history, and those in the hard sciences, such as electrical engineering, are among the least popular.

What is it we scholars are trying to accomplish? Our goals are not only to increase our knowledge of the Middle East but also to raise questions about how the region became what it is today. Surely academic progress is measured not only in the discovery of answers but also in the production of the next set of questions to probe, and as important, the creation of future generations prepared to offer their wisdom from the information they discover.



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