

Conspicuously Exercising Academic Freedom as a Response to Incremental Threats

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Abstract

Rights, liberties, and freedoms are never secure when they lie dormant or unused. A false sense of security in presumably safe freedoms exists partly because institutional policies give such freedoms cursory mention, and a historical protection of such freedoms can breed a misplaced confidence in continued protection. The temperature of the illiberal threat to academic freedom is heating in the modern sociopolitical climate, and the risk of complacency is grave. For academic freedom to be properly understood and secured, a renewed commitment to its active practice is crucial and urgent. A sustained culture of robust and visible practice of a particular freedom highlights any attempt to restrain it, while we might barely notice the erosion or repeal of a freedom that we do not exercise.

Academic freedom is often thought of as a defensive freedom, a dormant right to be invoked as a blanket of protection after a faculty member faces sanction, penalty, or reprisal for a protected activity (Stachowiak-Kudła et al. 2023). The active and visible practice of those protected freedoms, however, can be an everyday affirmation of living and breathing rights, in a manner that reminds students, colleagues, postsecondary administrations, and the public of the importance of “rigorous, intense, and open inquiry” (Zimmer 2015). As the AAUP’s 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* makes clear, the prophylactic measures of academic freedom, such as tenure and due process, are not themselves the protected value but a “means to certain ends” (14). Freedom of teaching, freedom of research, and freedom of intramural and extramural expression are the positive and visible practices of academic freedom. These core freedoms are secured not just with policy and union contracts but also through routine practice and habit. As autocratic and otherwise censorious movements presently coalesce, the need to reinforce public understanding of the importance of academic freedom has become more urgent. The intentionally visible practice of protected freedoms is a strategy for their continued security, informed by historical counterreactionary success in relation to preservation and promotion of other rights, liberties, and restrictions on government and bureaucratic power (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019). In an era of coercive threats to academic freedom, the conspicuous practice of such freedoms may require the courage to decline funding that comes with strings

attached, and the boldness to practice intramural and extramural speech in new settings and toward new audiences.

Incremental Coercion as an Autocratic Strategy

The erosion of academic freedom is rarely accomplished in a single sweeping act; instead it is brought about cumulatively, through repeated chipping at the edifice of such freedoms over time (Altbach 2001). Additionally, attacks on academic freedom often do not directly repeal or abridge the right of a faculty member to exercise their own freedom of teaching and research; rather, they manifest as a powerful indirect threat to the practice of such freedoms. As Rogers Brubaker (2018) observes, “Docile subjects are produced, most effectively, through anticipatory self-censorship.” These twin characteristics of incrementalism and coercion as opposed to full-frontal assault may make the threat to academic freedom feel ephemeral, but in practice they are effective because they deny the defenders of such freedoms an inflection point for opposition.

Internationally, we can see the success of the incremental strategy, for example, in the Republic of Hungary. Beginning in 2010, the country’s postsecondary institutions were targeted by the majority nationalist-conservative political party in a series of government actions and legislation intended to curtail institutional independence and bring curriculum in line with state goals. The incremental nature of policy changes and passage of at least seven new laws over a decade meant that no single action was seen as a climactic moment for protest until most of the damage had been done (Ignatieff and Roch 2018). The many reforms in Hungary included the replacement of boards of trustees with political officials, enhanced ability for the government to overrule accreditors, the abolition of gender studies programs, performance appraisal systems that tended to have a chilling effect on research independence, and increasing precarity in employment among academics (Kováts and Rónay 2021).

The United States is experiencing similar incremental encroachment by government upon the independence of postsecondary institutions and faculty. At the state level, the Florida legislature chipped away at established norms in a manner that provided few inflection points for a resistance to gain a foothold. The Orwellian-titled “Stop WOKE Act” would have limited how academics teach about race and gender, but it was eventually permanently enjoined by federal courts (Hutchens and Miller 2023; Odeh and Meij 2025). However, a slew of further state legislation enacted in subsequent months and years restricted or eliminated course offerings, cut specified funding, impeded academic research, increased the precarity of faculty, and eroded shared governance at state institutions (AAUP 2023). On the federal level, as the Trump administration accelerates its unprecedented withdrawal of federal grants, some actions have been temporarily enjoined by federal courts while others remain in place, again depriving opponents of a sole inflection point for successful counterprotest. The administration initially issued an order banning diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in relation to federal spending, including to universities, sending institutions nationwide into a frenzy of voluntary compliance with an order of dubious legality (Binkley 2025). Executive Order 14151, designed by the White

House to terminate “equity-related” grants, was eventually stopped by a federal court in Maryland. However, at the time of this writing the Trump administration continues to threaten to withdraw various grants administered through the National Institutes of Health, the US Department of Education, and other sources, especially in relation to Ivy League institutions such as Harvard University (Mallapaty 2025). In a public statement in May 2025, the president urged Harvard to “behave themselves” and threatened, “Every time they fight, they lose another \$250 million” (Pereira 2025). This coercive strategy was successful with the administration of Columbia University. When the institution was abruptly denied approximately \$400 million in existing research grants from federal agencies, ostensibly in retaliation for campus expression disfavored by the federal executive branch (Dorf 2025), the university administration chose not to resist. Instead of embarking on prolonged litigation, Columbia settled with the Trump administration, explicitly obligating itself to curtail specific types of campus expression (Laviertes 2025).

A Proactive Response to Threats to Academic Freedom

A cowering and careful version of academic freedom will be easier for autocratic and illiberal forces to further curtail through their incremental and coercive strategies. Academic freedom does not exist in the abstract or in dormancy; it becomes relevant only through frequent and vigorous exercise. The creeping and incremental nature of threats to academic freedom does not lend itself to urgent political rancor and should be seen as an intentional strategy by autocrats to undermine efforts at opposition (Stockemer 2025). Understanding that there will not be a single climactic showdown means that academia must bolster its frequent and visible exercise of protected freedoms. This renewed commitment is needed so that both inside and outside of academia, any infringements will be more readily noticeable and broadly felt. The hesitancy to exercise protected freedoms is informed by the fear that visibly standing up to politically motivated interference with curriculum, instruction, research, and speech might make the fight even fiercer and might motivate the political Right to further threaten universities and their faculty. Even indirect threats have a chilling effect. As University of Chicago President Robert Hutchins observed during the McCarthy era, “The problem with witch hunts is not how many professors would be fired for their beliefs, but how many think they might be” (Cole 2021).

Academic administrators are perhaps even more easily coerced than academics due to their more direct connection with and lack of insulation from autocratically motivated actors. This susceptibility to influence caused the former rector of Central European University, which was forced to relocate to Austria from Hungary following government interference, to state, “Academic freedom is too important to be left to universities to defend by themselves” (Ignatieff and Roch 2018). Academics must therefore conclude that the enlistment of the broader public, boards of trustees, and students will be more important as such freedoms are challenged more strongly than at any time in recent memory.

In addition to these challenges, academic freedom is something of an obscure protection in the public consciousness, and perhaps even among scholars. The public intellectual Ronald

Dworkin, writing in the mid-1990s, observed an undercurrent of apathy about academic freedom. He noticed this apathy not from disinterested students or citizens but from academics themselves, manifesting as a lack of conviction: “We have lately become less confident of our importance and less ready to insist on our independence. We have allowed academic freedom to seem pale and abstract, and even fraudulent. But we must now remember how easy it has proved, elsewhere, for that freedom to be lost, and how hard it is to regain once lost” (Dworkin 1996).

In the modern climate, the time for any apathy toward academic freedom must pass. Activists breathed life into civil rights protections by vigorously exercising their right to unsegregated spaces. University students breathed life into free speech protections through campus demonstrations. So too can academics breathe life into academic freedom by continuing to teach critical race theory in law classrooms despite hostile legislatures and boards of trustees. These actions come with risk, but history has shown that cowering from the continued hearty exercise of protected freedoms amounts to a form of compliance—turning a freedom into nothing more than a desire always deferred.

Actively Resisting the Influence of Corporations and the Wealthy

In her book on academic freedom, *Dirty Knowledge*, Julia Schleck (2022) notes that academia submits to control when it relies excessively on grants and funding schemes designed, promoted, and distributed by individuals with profit motive in the resulting research. She warns that this merely propagates a “dangerous intellectual monoculture” where the needs of the few are prioritized in intellectual and scientific inquiry, thereby displacing the needs of the many. She calls for the pursuit of knowledge in directions not prioritized by entrepreneurial, corporate, or government aims. By restoring the diversity of ideas in academia, and following lines of inquiry “that are irrelevant to the desires of cultural and economic capital,” we foster intellectual diversity in a way that creates a vast “seed bank” of knowledge for future uses we cannot currently fathom. Schleck’s (2022, 108) words are poetic and clear: “Within our walls we house the ancient and the futuristic, the bizarre and mundane, the immediately useful and the seemingly pointless, the dangerous and the exciting. We create all these ideas and more, and we are continually generating new ones and storing them away for future use.”

Whether it is historical research on pathogens that suddenly became more relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic or polemics on fascism from the 1930s that now inform counterauthoritarian strategy in modern democracies, we never know when currently mundane or seemingly irrelevant inquiry will have consequential value. Our inquiry today is an act of hope and aspiration that we contribute to the long thread of knowledge creation that such inquiry provides for society. It may be that resistance to coercive influence requires rejecting research funding with strings attached.

Enlisting Students and the Public in Defense of Academic Freedom

The golden age of scholarly participation in major counterreactionary movements has passed. As the activism and rancor of the late 1960s and early 1970s waned, the moral urgency found in the topics of civil rights and the Vietnam conflict never found a strong foothold in modern policy debates. It is worth remembering that the interests of capital and nationalism both focus intently on the academic curriculum and larger campus setting precisely to promote ideology, and that rival ideas to these interests should make themselves prominent in response (Rahbari et al. 2024). As the threat of modern illiberal movements gain steam, we may be due for a revival of teach-ins, mass demonstrations, protest, and the circulation of ideas in which scholarly advocates have always been core players. For academics to nurse a broader understanding of the importance of academic freedom, a modern teach-in movement is needed, requiring scholars to step outside the shell of the typical classroom or laboratory and engage with their communities on the topics of their expertise in the context of our uniquely threatening political moment. Teach-ins helped to legitimize dissent to war in Vietnam by lending scholarly and evidence-informed voices to the biggest policy debate of the age (Sahlins 2009). Teach-ins gave a complacent public, one mired for decades in demagogic rhetoric about communism, a broader understanding informed by data, history, and context. Most important, teach-ins were not endorsed by institutional bureaucracies and political authorities but were fully extracurricular, spontaneous, and open to the public. With a goal of public information as opposed to credit-hour generation, this is indeed an added task on the backs of overworked scholars, but it may also be an essential and necessary method of communication, uniquely suited to the skills of scholars, on matters of importance not presently getting the attention they are due.

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