

Editors' Introduction: Philanthropy, Public Funding, and the Future of Academic Freedom

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In the spring of 2024, Columbia University suspended several student organizations following protests against Israel's assault on Gaza. Within days, major donors threatened to withdraw funding unless the university adopted a more aggressive stance against these protests, what the donors described as antisemitism on campus. These events marked a turning point, as the convergence of donor pressure and political intervention began to reshape the boundaries of permissible discourse in higher education.

That same year, the ultraconservative Heritage Foundation authored Project Esther, a campaign framed as an anti-antisemitism initiative but strategically designed to suppress discourse on Palestine in K–12 and university curricula, and to quash what the project labeled as a “virulently anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, and anti-American ‘pro-Palestinian movement’ [that] is part of a global Hamas Support Network (HSN)” (Baker 2025; Heritage Foundation 2024).¹ This project, funded by other major corporate conservative donors and foundations, emerged as an extension of Project 2025's far-right agenda, seeking to criminalize dissent and reshape federal power to suppress speech critical of Israel. By urging universities and lawmakers to punish or expel those who support Palestine, the plan threatens to institutionalize ideological conformity

¹ The Heritage Foundation (2024) defines “the Hamas Support Network (HSN) inside America as the people and organizations that are both directly and indirectly involved in furthering Hamas's cause in contravention of American values and to the detriment of American citizens and America's national security interests. Driven by an ideology that is decidedly antisemitic, anti-Israel, and anti-American, the network revolves around American Muslims for Palestine (AMP). AMP supports and motivates such national affiliated HSOs as National Students for Justice in Palestine (NSJP, or SJP) and Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP), among many others. Housed under the umbrella of academic institutions, and comprised of students, faculty, and staff, these HSOs serve as AMP's ‘action arms,’ recruiting members; disseminating propaganda; coordinating and conducting rallies; leading demonstrations; and intimidating Jews, academic administrations, and local governments. A coalition of leftist, progressive organizations such as the Open Society Foundations, Tides Foundation, and numerous others whose broader goals generally align with those of AMP and its associated HSOs provides financial resources and other material support such as equipment, training, and advice and consulting services across the HSN. The material and administrative connective tissue common to the leadership, members, and organizations comprising the HSN forms its infrastructure. This infrastructure supports and includes propaganda dissemination to spread HSN ideology, financial aggregation and distribution, policy and legislative support, communications, and the legal veil under which the HSN operates.”

in higher education. Critics warned that such measures would gravely undermine academic freedom, transforming campuses into sites of surveillance and censorship rather than inquiry and debate. Together, these donor-backed initiatives crystallize a broader strategy in which partisan state power and ultraconservative ideology converge to weaponize the “war on woke” while exploiting tensions between antigenocide activism and antisemitic anxieties to fracture progressive coalitions and reassert federal dominance over the boundaries of academic discourse. These events echo 2025 federal interventions at UCLA, Harvard, Columbia, and elsewhere where investigations and public pressure functioned less as neutral oversight and more as ideological enforcement—illustrating how political actors now operate in tandem with major donor agendas.

Since 2024, faculty members across the country have found themselves navigating inquiries into their syllabi, public statements, and classroom discussions. The episode at Columbia, while hardly unprecedented, dramatized the tensions that define higher education in our time: the increasing dependence of universities on private philanthropy and the corrosion of academic freedom under political and financial pressures of what Michael Edwards and others have termed “philanthrocapitalism” (Edwards 2008). What begins as a philanthropic pledge to sustain higher learning often reveals itself as an instrument of agenda setting, donor leverage, and ideological capture. These developments reveal a deeper structural crisis: The convergence of private philanthropy and state power threatens to redefine the university not as a space of free inquiry but as a site of ideological enforcement.

Philanthropy has never been a neutral force in higher education. As Jeanine Cunningham and Michael Dreiling (2021) have argued in earlier research on elite environmental philanthropy, private giving is typically motivated by a mixture of reputational aspirations, economic interests, greenwashing or other public-relations agendas, and the desire to steer policy and public opinion in ways congenial to elite preferences, as predicted by the channeling thesis.² Some donor gifts are relatively benign, rooted in personal affiliation with an alma mater or in reputational patronage that seeks little more than the meaning derived from the gift, while obtaining tax benefits and public recognition. Others, however, pursue more aggressive ends: shaping the curriculum, guiding faculty appointments, or restricting forms of knowledge production deemed threatening to donors’ cultural alignments and political or economic interests.

These ideological interventions are particularly acute in the liberal arts, where the foundational methodological model of critical inquiry—especially critical histories of the West and the nation—has become a central target of conservative philanthropic agendas (Rosario

² The channeling thesis argues that when social movements, universities, or nonprofit organizations depend on foundation or elite philanthropic funding, their agendas and tactics become subtly steered—or “channeled”—toward moderate, system-compatible forms of action. Rather than supporting disruptive, grassroots, or redistributive demands, foundations tend to fund professionalized advocacy, policy research, and service delivery that align with elite interests or preserve institutional legitimacy. This dynamic emerges from resource dependence: Organizations adapt to donor priorities to secure continued funding, which over time narrows the boundaries of acceptable dissent and frames reform in technocratic or apolitical terms. In essence, the channeling thesis exposes philanthropy as both a source of support and a mechanism of control, shaping the moral and political horizons of public life by redefining what kinds of social change are fundable, and thus thinkable.

2025). One prominent example is the Turning Point USA movement, which has mobilized students across campuses and classrooms around these antihumanistic ideologies. Coinciding with the 250th anniversary of the US Declaration of Independence in 2026, they have called for a “Campus Patriotic Project to inspire patriotism among young Americans on over 2,100 high school and college campuses.” Turning Point USA declares its animosity to any critical historiography or narrative of the body politic that so much as challenges their one-way view of American society, calling for an active mobilization of students in the classroom to record and denounce “dissidents” from the national telos. Their stated purpose is “fighting back against the radical Left’s anti-American narrative by proudly displaying American flags signed by patriots like you” (Turning Point USA n.d.). At the recent funeral for Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk, a large array of donors and ideologues converged around the renewed impetus to close down the American mind and dispel the notion of critical cultural and social histories.

An immediate victim of these ideological attacks by Turning Point USA and of its influence on the federal government is Rutgers University historian Mark Bray, who recently went into political exile in Spain. In an interview with Sebastiaan Faber, Bray pointed out that the intent of the Trump administration is to turn the state into a biased, partisan, ideological tool for its authoritarian project:

Lo que estamos viendo hoy en Estados Unidos es un proyecto que parece querer atravesar el propio Estado para convertirlo en el defensor de los valores partidistas, al mismo tiempo que toda persona u organización que se oponga a esos valores acaba retratada como una oposición terrorista que tiene que ser destruida.

What we are seeing today in the United States is a project that seems to want to permeate the state itself to make it the defender of partisan values, whereby any person or organization that opposes those values ends up being portrayed as a terrorist opposition that has to be destroyed.

(Faber 2025, translation by Pedro García-Caro)

These Turning Point USA campaigns exemplify how ideological philanthropy can mobilize not only institutional policy but also student behavior, reinforcing a climate of censorship, surveillance, persecution, and conformity. Such efforts underscore the need to distinguish between the varied forms and intentions of philanthropic engagement in higher education.

Building on this, it becomes clear that philanthropy comes in types—and distinguishing between its reputational, profit-seeking, and ideological forms is vital for understanding its implications for academic freedom. Overall, social science research supports the channeling thesis: Elite philanthropy tends to steer gifts to institution-building that tempers and moderates social change in a more conservative direction (Brulle and Jenkins 2005; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Reckhow 2013; Roelofs 2003; Suárez 2012). In his comprehensive political theory of philanthropy, Rob Reich concludes that the large scale of present-day donations constitutes “a plutocratic exercise of power” (Reich 2018, 7). Joshua Hunt’s *The University of Nike* (2018) shows how

corporate philanthropy—exemplified by Nike founder Phil Knight’s deep financial and branding influence at his alma mater, the University of Oregon—creates structural dependencies that erode institutional autonomy and public accountability. By revealing how donor interests shape research agendas, hiring decisions, and campus culture, Hunt exposes how privatized funding undermines the democratic and critical mission of higher education. Knight’s enormous gifts reshaped priorities in Oregon through funding for athletics, facilities, and research initiatives, while simultaneously creating governance relationships that gave donors privileged access to decision-makers (Hunt 2018). Even reputational gifts can reshape institutional priorities when they are tied to visibility, athletics, or branding, often sidelining traditional academic missions.

The contradictions of the philanthropic turn in higher education are intensified by the crisis of public funding for higher education. As state appropriations diminish and tuition-driven models strain under demographic pressures, institutions increasingly turn to private donors to sustain their budgets. But this reliance produces what might be called the “metacontradiction of higher education”: Universities, dedicated to the common good of knowledge production in all its diversity, must increasingly monetize knowledge by courting private philanthropy. This process elevates the market logics of scarcity, prestige, and private interest over the university’s public-serving mission. The consequence is not merely budgetary compromise but the potential corruption of the knowledge sphere across society more generally. When knowledge is reshaped to align with donor priorities and narrow monied interests, the collective project of free inquiry yields to a system of competing agendas, internal schisms, and distorted priorities. The risk of corruption grows in proportion to institutional dependency on private capital.

These dynamics are not simply financial. They operate in broader political and cultural fields, intersecting with what Stuart Hall (1988) once described as an “authoritarian turn” of late modern societies. Across the United States, state legislatures have attacked diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs; university administrators have censored curricula around race, gender, and empire; and political actors have cynically mobilized charges of antisemitism to discipline institutions and silence dissent (see *JAF* vols. 14 and 15). Federal scrutiny, as seen in recent interventions, legitimizes the idea that external actors—whether donors or government officials—can direct institutional behavior, weakening claims to academic autonomy and constraining the principle of academic freedom.

Conservative megadonors have sustained interventions, propagating state bills such as Indiana’s SB-202, and high-profile attacks on DEI efforts at institutions like Harvard and the University of Texas, illustrating how knowledge about genocide, racial justice, and coloniality is policed through both political and philanthropic channels (Dreiling and García-Caro 2024, 3–4). The authoritarian subversion of academic freedom thus thrives on two fronts: on the one hand, the state’s coercive power to define the limits of legitimate discourse, and on the other, donors’ financial leverage to enforce ideological conformity. These pressures are institutionalized through mechanisms like side letters, donor advisory roles, and performance-linked giving, which incentivize short-term visibility over long-term scholarly integrity. The “Compact for

Academic Excellence” that the White House recently proposed to a number of institutions of higher education exemplifies the attempts to cloak thought-control in the guise of academic reform. While presented as a voluntary agreement to uphold excellence, the compact ties federal funding to compliance with ideologically charged conditions—such as restrictions on gender terminology, limits on foreign student enrollment, and mandates to protect conservative viewpoints. This model echoes earlier federal interventions that blurred the line between support and surveillance. During the Cold War, for instance, federal funding for area studies and social sciences was explicitly designed to align academic research with national security goals, steering scholarship toward strategic interests. Similarly, the McCarthy-era loyalty oaths—most notably at the University of California—required faculty to affirm anticommunist positions as a condition of employment, undermining academic autonomy. More recently, the Department of Justice’s 2025 ultimatum to UCLA, demanding sweeping policy changes in exchange for restoring \$584 million in research funding, illustrates how federal leverage can be used to reshape institutional priorities. These historical precedents reveal a recurring pattern: When federal compacts or funding agreements embed ideological conditions, they risk transforming universities from spaces of free inquiry into instruments of political conformity (American Historical Association 2024). The “Compact for Academic Excellence” thus represents not a novel policy but the latest iteration of a long-standing tension between academic freedom and state power (Zdencanovic and Myers 2025). These ideological campaigns reveal how donor influence can extend beyond institutional policy into the realm of student behavior and classroom surveillance. But to fully understand the scope and impact of philanthropy on academic freedom, we must move beyond individual cases and consider the structural logics that underpin donor engagement. This requires distinguishing between reputational, profit-driven, and ideological forms of philanthropy—each with distinct implications for institutional autonomy.

The history of philanthropy in higher education offers many examples of such conflicts of interest. Donor campaigns have sought to influence everything from faculty hiring and curriculum design to student speech and campus governance. As the case studies in this volume reveal, the Charles Koch Foundation pioneered one model of donor control, embedding its representatives in program oversight and curriculum committees. Even when public backlash forced modifications to grant agreements, more subtle forms of what Isaac Kamola, Aaron Supple, and Ralph Wilson call “diffuse donor influence” persisted, shaping institutional missions while avoiding overt control. While Koch’s influence is most visible in private institutions, the University of Oregon’s entanglement with Phil Knight offers a public university parallel. Knight’s gifts reshaped governance, priorities, and culture—demonstrating how donor proximity to leadership can bypass faculty oversight and institutional transparency. These practices highlight how donor power evolves over time, adapting to scrutiny but rarely relinquishing the ambition to steer academic life.

At the same time, not all philanthropy carries the same risks. Moderate, reputational gifts—whether endowing a scholarship fund or renovating a library—do not necessarily pose the same

threats as donations explicitly designed to advance political or ideological agendas. The challenge lies in distinguishing between these forms and in developing governance mechanisms that protect academic freedom while recognizing the legitimate contributions philanthropy can make. As John Dewey (1927) noted in a different context, the test of any institutional arrangement lies in its consequences for democracy. By that standard, philanthropy that sustains access, diversity, and intellectual independence deserves encouragement, while philanthropy that curtails dissent or promotes ideological conformity demands resistance and transparent accountability. To defend academic freedom, universities must adopt safeguards: mandatory disclosure of gift terms, faculty review of academic-impact donations, conflict-of-interest rules for trustees, and legislative standards for transparency and autonomy. These reforms are essential to preserve the civic mission of public education.

This volume of the *Journal of Academic Freedom* takes up these questions directly. Its articles probe the uneasy relationship between philanthropy and academic freedom across a wide range of cases, regions, and disciplines. They examine whether neoliberalism has proven compatible with academic freedom, how donor-influence campaigns shape higher education, how philanthropy intersects with racial capitalism to “whitewash” knowledge, and how tensions between private interests and the common good continue to reconfigure the academic landscape. Collectively, the contributions show that academic freedom cannot be defended without critically examining the financial infrastructures and political economies that sustain or threaten it.

Was Neoliberalism Compatible with Academic Freedom?

The opening cluster of articles interrogate the compatibility of neoliberalism and academic freedom. **Natasha N. Johnson and Thaddeus L. Johnson** analyze how philanthropic dependency shapes public sentiments about higher education by taking a deep dive into the withdrawal of public funding for universities and the resulting intensification of donor influence. Their article traces the destructive logic of donors’ overriding faculty expertise and shared governance and the oversized impact this is already having on public trust in higher education and its autonomous production of knowledge. **Rubén Martinez** historicizes the state’s withdrawal from higher education and the emergence of neoliberal philanthropy as a structural force in the erosion of academic freedom. The commoditization of knowledge goes hand in hand with venture philanthropy. It has a deeply deleterious effect on academic freedom and scholarly agency, thus profoundly distorting the mission of higher education. Aaron Ansell reflects on the responsibilities of academic freedom in an age of polarization, raising the question of how scholars might defend autonomy while remaining accountable to broader publics. These articles frame the volume’s central tension: whether the neoliberal reliance on private philanthropy and the constant deployment of donors’ wishes and views is structurally corrosive of academic freedom, or whether conditions for compatibility can be imagined.

Donor-Influence Campaigns

The second section of articles turns to donor-influence campaigns, where philanthropic agendas directly reshape academic life. Few issues so sharply illustrate the contradictions of contemporary philanthropy as the sprawling footprint of the Koch Foundation in higher education. **Kamola, Supple, and Wilson's** contribution traces this history in meticulous detail, showing how the foundation shifted from overt control—donors placed on hiring committees and oversight boards—toward what the authors call “diffuse donor influence.” Even when contracts appeared to retreat from micromanagement, the underlying strategy remained constant: to embed libertarian ideology into the institutional DNA of recipient universities. Vague clauses about “mission alignment” and “open inquiry” allowed the foundation to retain leverage while avoiding the public backlash that dogged earlier agreements. This analysis forces us to see that donor influence has not been curtailed by scrutiny—it has simply been retooled, moving from the visible to the structural.

If Kamola, Supple, and Wilson document the architecture of this influence, **Mich Cieurria's** case study provides its human consequences. “UnKoch My Philosophy Department” recounts the struggles of faculty resisting the infiltration of billionaire philanthropy into the very heart of intellectual life. Cieurria connects the Koch campaign to Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò's concept of “elite capture,” showing how resources and legitimacy are diverted to projects that reproduce the perspectives of the powerful under the guise of neutrality. Philosophy, often imagined as the last bastion of free inquiry, becomes another arena where donor capital imposes limits on what can be taught, researched, or debated. Cieurria's call to reject such funding is not merely rhetorical—it is a demand to confront the normalization of private influence in the academy.

The consequences of donor capture are not confined to ideological skewing of specific departments. As **Jarvis Tyrell Curry** demonstrates, they strike at the very foundations of governance and accountability. By analyzing cases at George Mason University and beyond, Curry exposes how nondisclosure agreements and opaque contracts conceal conflicts of interest from faculty oversight. What is at stake here is not only the content of donor influence but the structures that allow it to operate unchecked. Curry calls for mandatory disclosure, faculty-led review bodies, and federal regulation—reminders that defending academic freedom requires not only critique but institutional reform.

Katie Rainwater and Robert Cassanello widen the lens further by examining Florida's state-funded libertarian centers. These centers, flush with public money but linked to Koch networks and partisan agendas, illustrate how donor logic can migrate into state policy itself. Their work demonstrates that the dangers of donor capture are not confined to private universities: Legislatures can create entire institutions that bypass shared governance while advancing narrow ideological projects. Taken together, these four contributions make plain that donor influence, whether private or public, operates as a systemic threat to academic independence. They remind us that philanthropy is not only a question of generosity but also a terrain of political and cultural struggle.

Whitewashing Knowledge

If the previous cluster documents how donor power reshapes institutions from the outside in, the articles in this section show how philanthropy intersects with racial capitalism—as coined by Robinson (1983), the notion that capitalism is a racialized system, exploiting differences in labor, culture, and identity to maximize profit and maintain hierarchies—to “whitewash” and restructure knowledge itself: delimiting what knowledge is produced, who produces it, and whose voices are silenced. At stake here is not just the autonomy of departments but the very terms on which intellectual work can be pursued.

J. R. Caldwell Jr. situates this problem squarely in the history of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Chronic underfunding has made these institutions particularly reliant on philanthropic support, but such support often comes with strings attached. Drawing on Derrick Bell’s “interest convergence” and W. E. B. Du Bois’s “double consciousness,” Caldwell shows how HBCUs are pressured to align with donor priorities, privileging STEM fields while marginalizing humanities and social sciences that address racial justice. This “philanthropic capture” undermines the emancipatory mission of Black institutions, forcing them to balance the demands of survival with commitments to liberation. The article captures a painful paradox: Philanthropy offers lifelines while constraining the very freedom it claims to support.

Fatemeh Almasarweh places these dynamics in a wider historical arc, using Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s “propaganda model” to show how universities routinely suppress dissent when it challenges dominant political narratives. From McCarthyism to the Vietnam era to post-9/11 surveillance, dissenting voices have been disciplined and silenced, often under the guise of neutrality. Today, advocacy for Palestinian rights faces similar treatment. Almasarweh demonstrates that donor pressure and administrative censorship are not isolated abuses but recurring strategies of ideological containment. The “blueprint” for silencing dissent is well established; what varies is the target.

Noah D. Drezner complicates this picture by interrogating what he views as double standards around financial activism at universities. He asks, Why is donor influence condemned while faculty activism, such as boycott, divest, and sanction campaigns, is often celebrated? Both, after all, leverage financial means to shape institutional policy. At times, his reasoning conflates what we consider to be qualitatively distinct domains of academic authority and governance, explicitly arguing that faculty voices for ethically and scientifically sound university policy and oversight for purchasing, contracts, and investments are substantively similar, as if donors bring the same academic, professional, and governance authority as faculty. We reject this conflation but also recognize that his answer to the tension does not excuse donor overreach; instead, it calls for a more consistent ethical framework, one that evaluates influence by with the aim of greater transparency, accountability, and consideration for academic freedom. Drezner’s contribution is a reminder that the ethics of financial power are not simple, and that defending academic freedom requires us to apply principles consistently even when our sympathies diverge.

Together, these articles show how philanthropy, politics, and race intersect to delimit the boundaries of academic inquiry. They demonstrate that the commodification of knowledge is not only a matter of budget lines and contracts but also one of who gets to define legitimate knowledge and whose voices are excluded. In this sense, the cluster is about not simply donor influence but also the reproduction of epistemic hierarchies in higher education.

Tensions and Schisms Between the Private and the Common Good

Finally, this volume of the *Journal of Academic Freedom* turns to tensions and schisms between private interests and the common good. **Drew X. Coles and Adara Hoyne** examine philanthropy's role in music education, highlighting class dynamics and cultural hegemony while reminding us that "philanthropic influence is rarely neutral." The influence of donors shaping the specific field of music education offers a clear study case of the ethical and pedagogical dilemmas posed by the financial dependency on private benefactors. Coles and Hoyne offer some very productive alternative models that allow us to envision future cooperative models for higher education and the reclaiming of public colleges and universities by local communities. **Michael Davis** reframes academic freedom as an active practice that must be reclaimed, enacted, and defended through visible teach-in movements to defy the combined federal and private onslaught on the autonomy of knowledge producers. **Sibeso Lisulo** offers a Zambian perspective, analyzing fiscal precarity and its impact on the erosion of academic freedom in African universities. **Carlos R. Morales** navigates the recent history of legal challenges and disputes over employees' speech rights as a framework to understand the constant encroachment on the professoriate's ability to exercise an authoritative voice in social and field-specific debates. The tightening of regulations limiting academic speech leads Morales to interrogate Indiana's SEA 202 as a state-imposed standard that constrains faculty autonomy. These articles collectively highlight the far-reaching dimensions of the problem, paying particular attention to the interconnection of regulatory and funding frameworks, highlighting the urgent need to defend academic freedom not as an abstract principle but as a lived practice in concrete institutional contexts.

As this volume of the *Journal of Academic Freedom* makes clear, defending academic freedom today requires confronting the structural entanglements of philanthropy, political ideology, and market governance. The spectrum of donor influence—from reputational gifts to ideological capture—demands not only critique but institutional reform. Historical precedents and recent developments show how both private capital and state power can reshape universities into instruments of conformity, undermining their civic mission. To preserve the university as a space of free inquiry, we must distinguish between philanthropic forms, enforce transparency, and adopt safeguards such as faculty oversight, disclosure requirements, and conflict-of-interest rules. Academic freedom is not merely a principle—it is a practice that must be actively defended through governance, vigilance, and a renewed commitment to knowledge as a public good.

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