
In Defense of Knowledge and Higher Education

(JANUARY 2020)

The following statement, prepared by a subcommittee of the Association's Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure, was approved by Committee A in October 2019 and adopted by the AAUP's Council in November 2019.

“Knowledge,” as Francis Bacon observed in 1597 at the dawn of the modern era, “is power.” Without knowledge no nation can govern its economy, manage its environment, sustain its public health, produce goods or services, understand its own history, or enable its citizens to understand the circumstances in which they live.

Knowledge is produced by the hard work of disciplined, well-trained investigators. Industry and government must hire doctors, chemists, lawyers, architects, teachers, journalists, economists, and engineers. Colleges and universities are the only institutions qualified to provide this expert training. It is therefore most unfortunate that at this moment of intense global instability, there is an ongoing movement to attack the disciplines and institutions that produce and transmit the knowledge that sustains American democracy.

This is not the first time that the very idea of expert knowledge has been under assault. Indeed, US secretary of education Betsy DeVos unironically recycles Pink Floyd—who in the 1970s sang, “We don’t need no education . . . teachers leave those kids alone”—when she warns college students that “the fight against the education establishment extends to you too. The faculty, from adjunct professors to deans, tell you what to do, what to say, and more ominously, what to think.”¹ When college students are

encouraged to confuse education with, as one student recently put it, being “intimidated by the academic elite in the classroom,” we have a crisis.²

Is it intimidation to teach eighteen-year-olds to solve differential equations? Is it intimidation to teach them the principles of quantum mechanics? Is it intimidation to teach them the somatic effects of nicotine? Is it intimidation to teach them about the history of slavery and Jim Crow, or the history of the Holocaust? Is it intimidation to teach them how to read closely the texts of Toni Morrison or Gabriel García-Márquez? Is it elitism to predict the path of a hurricane? Is it elitism to track the epidemic of opioid addiction? Or to study the impact of tariffs on the economy?

We do not think so. This is research and education, not intimidation or elitism. Coiled beneath the comments of Secretary DeVos lies the assumption that all knowledge is just opinion and that each person has an equal right to her own opinion. Stephen Colbert put it nicely, referring to what he called “truthiness”: “It used to be everyone was entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts. But that’s not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all.”³ Now some would urge us to inhabit a universe of “alternative facts.”

¹-betsy-devos'-prepared-remarks-2017-conservative-political-action-conference.

² John K. Wilson, “The Tennessee Legislature’s Attack on Free Speech,” *Academe Blog*, February 12, 2017, <https://academeblog.org/2017/02/12/the-tennessee-legislatures-attack>.

³ Stephen Colbert, interview by the A.V. Club, *A.V. Club*, January 25, 2006, <https://www.avclub.com/stephen-colbert-1798208958>.

But, as John Adams long ago observed, “Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”⁴ If we ignore facts, we will forever be running aground on their unseen shoals. It is especially worrisome, then, to witness what has become an organized attack on knowledge.

The AAUP has recently reported on the assault on science and technology, as has the Union of Concerned Scientists. Both organizations document what one journalist has called “an all-out war on science.”⁵ The war has taken many forms: shutting out scientific expertise from decision-making, “suppressing scientific studies when their findings undercut the administration’s political agenda,” and politicizing the research grant-making process by subordinating it to political appointees.⁶

No state can organize effective government policy except on the basis of informed, dispassionate investigation. What kind of government policy can we make when the Department of Agriculture refuses to release studies into the effects of climate change on rice production, allergenic grasses, and cattle feeding, merely because such studies contradict the fantasy that climate change is not occurring?⁷ Or when the Department of Justice suppresses its own data collection on white supremacist domestic terrorism? Or when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are prohibited from funding research on gun violence? Or when a gag order is imposed on doctors under Title X

regulations prohibiting discussion of abortion or contraception? We cannot eat ideological belief; wishful thinking will not keep us safe.

How can we better prepare for future storms when an independent university study of the impact of Hurricane Irma is dismissed on political grounds? How can we develop a credible foreign policy, ensure effective diplomacy, and prepare our military when area studies and foreign language programs are curtailed, eliminated, or made subject to political intrusion? Slogans and superstition are no match for the growing complexity and interconnectedness of today’s world.

It is not only research that is affected; teaching is as well. Teaching is, after all, the transmission of knowledge and a means of its production. A narrowing focus on vocational training, combined with attacks on the liberal arts and general education, closes off access to the varieties of knowledge and innovative thinking needed to participate meaningfully in our democracy. As one journalist wrote, “Stripping higher education, especially public higher education, of anything but pragmatic, technical, or transactional courses completely undermines the mission of a college or university.”⁸ Or, as the AAUP and the Association of American Colleges and Universities stated in 2018, “Institutions of higher education, if they are truly to serve as institutions of higher education, should provide more than narrow vocational training and should seek to enhance students’ capacities for lifelong learning.”⁹

What Do We Mean by Knowledge?

There are, of course, endless philosophical debates about the meaning of “knowledge.” For our purposes, however, we need define it only as those understandings of the world upon which we rely because they are produced by the best methods at our disposal. The expert knowledge to which we refer is not produced merely by immediate sense impressions. One cannot know the half-life of plutonium-238 merely by staring at a lump of rock. One cannot know the effect of sugar on the body merely by eating candy. One cannot

4. John Adams, “Argument for the Defense: 3–4 December 1770,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/05-03-02-0001-0004-0016>.

5. Nick Paumgarten, “The Message of Measles,” *New Yorker*, September 2, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/09/02/the-message-of-measles>. See also *National Security, the Assault on Science, and Academic Freedom*, in *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* (special issue of *Academe*), July–August 2018, 25–37, and Jacob Carter et al., *The State of Science in the Trump Era: Damage Done, Lessons Learned, and a Path to Progress* (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2019), <https://www.ucsusa.org/center-science-and-democracy/state-of-science-trump-era>.

6. Carter et al., *The State of Science*.

7. Helena Bottemiller Evich, “Agriculture Department Buries Studies Showing Dangers of Climate Change,” *Politico*, June 23, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/06/23/agriculture-department-climate-change-1376413>.

8. Willard Dix, “The ‘Wisconsin Idea’ Is More Important Than Ever in Higher Education,” *Forbes*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/willarddix/2018/03/19/the-wisconsin-idea-is-more-important-than-ever-in-higher-education/>.

9. AAUP, “Joint Statement with AAC&U on the Liberal Arts,” May 31, 2018, <https://www.aaup.org/news/joint-statement-aacu-liberal-arts>.

know whether the climate is changing merely by bringing snowballs into the well of the Capitol.¹⁰

To know any of these things, one must use the disciplinary methods of chemistry or medicine or atmospheric science. These disciplines cumulatively produce understandings that are continuously tested and revised by communities of trained scholars. Expert knowledge is a process of constant exploration, revision, and adjudication. Expert knowledge, and the procedures by which it is produced, are subject to endless reexamination and reevaluation. It is this process of self-questioning that justifies society's reliance on expert knowledge. Such knowledge may in the end prove accurate or inaccurate, but it is the best we can do at any given time. That is why we are largely justified in relying on it.

Expert knowledge is not produced in a "marketplace of ideas" in which all opinions are equally valid. The dialogue that produces expert knowledge occurs among those who are qualified by virtue of their training, education, and disciplinary practice. To know why vaping presents a harm to public health, we need to know the difference between a type I and type II error in statistics; to know whether Caliban is Shakespeare's comment on colonization in the Americas, we need to know both the facts of Elizabethan expansion and the history of Elizabethan theater; to begin to understand conflicts in the Middle East, we need to know about the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The debate is open and fierce, but mere opinion has no place at the table. That is why we need experts.

Knowledge comes in different forms. Scientific knowledge is pragmatic; it "can be tested against the sharp and bounded imperatives of prediction and control."¹¹ In contrast, the social sciences and humanities, as John Dewey described them, address and sometimes challenge "the habits and modes of life to which people have accustomed themselves and with which the worth of life is bound up."¹² They offer interpretive, evidence-based readings of social structures, of cultural patterns of differentiation, of the construction

of art and literature. For that reason "what counts as knowledge" may be "far more controversial" in these areas of inquiry, but its advancement is no less dependent on expertise.¹³

In the end, it is for society to judge whether the knowledge produced by these practices is worth having. Knowledge, including knowledge of the past, exists to serve the needs of the living. As more groups gain access to higher education, they bring new demands for the expansion of expert knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge is enriched by these new challenges. American intellectual history began to look different when it finally included Frederick Douglass and Fred Korematsu. It continues to look different now that it includes Pauli Murray and Sandra Cisneros.

Academic Freedom and Free Speech

Academic freedom, the lifeblood of American higher education, protects the independence of faculty members in their pursuit of expert knowledge and in their transmission of this knowledge to students. The founders of the AAUP cited approvingly the words of a university president who insisted on the importance of critical thinking for faculty members and students alike: "It is better for students to think about heresies," he wrote, "than not to think at all; better for them to climb new trails and stumble over error if need be, than to ride forever in upholstered ease on the over-crowded highway."¹⁴

A line of attack on higher education has proceeded under the seemingly impeccable banner of freedom of speech. There has been an explicit political campaign attacking universities as enemies of freedom of speech. Since all are equally entitled to freedom of speech, scholarly standards and criteria are attacked as mere intimidation and unjustifiable censorship.

This attack rests on a fundamental misunderstanding. Freedom of speech is a political and civil liberty. We have freedom of speech, as the Supreme Court has said, so that "government may be responsive to the will of the people and that changes may be obtained by lawful means."¹⁵ In our democracy, every person, regardless of competence or qualification, is entitled to have an opinion because democracy requires political

10. Philip Bump, "Jim Inhofe's Snowball Has Disproven Climate Change Once and For All," *Washington Post*, February 26, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/02/26/jim-inhofes-snowball-has-disproven-climate-change-once-and-for-all/>.

11. Robert Post, "Debating Disciplinarity," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 6.

12. John Dewey, "Academic Freedom," in *John Dewey, The Middle Works: 1899–1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 2:58.

13. Post, "Debating Disciplinarity," 6.

14. 1915 *Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure*, in AAUP, *Policy Documents and Reports*, 11th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 10.

15. *Near v. State of Minnesota Ex Rel. Olson*, 283 U.S. 697 (1931).

equality. Freedom of speech is therefore a precious right possessed by each individual, including members of colleges and universities. Together, through the exercise of freedom of speech, we forge a common political will.

The production of expert knowledge, by contrast, is not about the formation of political will. The first premise of scientific procedure, Thomas Kuhn famously observed, is that we do not submit questions of scientific knowledge to a vote. That is because knowledge is not about our political preferences; it is about the nature of the world. Expert knowledge is therefore not produced by simple freedom of speech. A major symptom of our contemporary crisis is that some nevertheless seek to subordinate expert knowledge to public opinion.

Academic freedom rests on a paradox. There must be freedom of inquiry, but that freedom must always be subject to peer judgment and evaluation. “Free inquiry in academia” is thus “predicated on voluntarily assumed forms of unfreedom that are unique to the academy.”¹⁶ So proclaimed the AAUP and the Association of American Colleges in 1940, in a statement now endorsed by more than 250 educational organizations: “Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole.”¹⁷ Academic freedom seeks to insulate research and teaching from political pressure.

The Undermining of Colleges and Universities since the 1970s

Knowledge is a public good. Because it serves the common good, it should be available for use by all. For that reason, America in the years after World War II believed that colleges and universities deserved increased public investment.¹⁸ From the very start, however, that commitment was not always equal. In the 1970s, the commitment to producing knowledge as a public good began to wane.

Just as the civil rights movement started to open the doors of higher education to historically excluded populations, federal and state support of public universities declined.¹⁹ With less public financial support, colleges and universities were forced to increase their reliance on student tuition, which in turn increased student debt. “Public higher education has undergone a financial and conceptual shift,” writes journalist Scott Carlson. “Once an investment covered mostly by the state to produce a workforce and an informed citizenry, today it is more commonly shouldered by individuals and families and described as a private benefit, a means to a credential and a job.” He further notes, “As the student population has diversified, the language that many people use to define the value of a college degree has shifted, from a public good to an individual one. Is that merely a coincidence?”²⁰

Cuts in funding have weakened colleges and universities in other ways. They have led to greater reliance on private support, which has augmented the role of wealthy donors, who may seek to restrict or direct scholarship in service of ideology or interest. They have encouraged the substitution of cheaper and more precarious contingent positions for faculty appointments with tenure. They have widened the gap between richer and poorer institutions. They have facilitated the rise of corporate management styles by administrators and trustees, with the consequent diminution of faculty participation in university governance. They have stimulated a consumerist conception of education, in which colleges

16. Adam Sitze, “Academic Unfreedom, Unacademic Freedom,” *Massachusetts Review* 58, no. 4 (2017): 598.

17. 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, in AAUP, *Policy Documents and Reports*, 11th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 14.

18. For data on spending on higher education between 1949 and 1990, see Marvin Lazerson, “The Disappointments of Success: Higher Education after World War II,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 559 (1998): 64–76.

19. Since the 1970s the federal share of all basic research support, mainly directed to universities, has fallen steadily, dropping from some 70 percent of all funding to just 44 percent in 2015. Between 2003 and 2013 state support for public research universities declined by 28 percent on a per-student basis. In 2017, only five states spent more per student than in 2008, with the average state spending 16 percent less. Between 2013 and 2016 some six hundred foreign language programs were eliminated. Ronald Brownstein writes that “[t]he latest annual survey of state spending by the State Higher Education Executive Officers found that, since 1992, spending per student—measured in inflation-adjusted dollars—has declined at public colleges and universities by about 8 percent (even after a recovery in spending after states’ low point in 2012). In turn, per-student tuition revenue has increased by 96 percent.” Ronald Brownstein, “American Higher Education Hits a Dangerous Milestone,” *Atlantic*, May 3, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/05/american-higher-education-hits-a-dangerous-milestone/559457/>.

20. Scott Carlson, “When College Was a Public Good,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 27, 2016, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/When-College-Was-a-Public-Good/238501>.

and universities submit to the preferences of student demand and interest. They have spawned an “assessment movement” to measure the impact of research and teaching in entirely “objective,” quantitative terms. They have produced “partnerships” with industry in which sponsoring corporations receive privileged access to and control of the direction of faculty research and teaching.

Undoubtedly, these developments have weakened American colleges and universities. The faith that American higher education produces expert knowledge that benefits the entire society has diminished. Indeed, the unequal and unfair distribution of educational opportunity may well have played a significant role in making expertise appear more like a privilege of the wealthy and an expression of their interests than a disinterested contribution to the public good.

But facts are facts. We need the knowledge, the technology, the art, and the culture that in a modern society are so deeply dependent on our colleges and universities. We also need a more equal and accessible system of education.

First Principles

Against these developments, we seek to recall first principles. Colleges and universities are disciplinary, not political, institutions. They exist to serve the common good in the production and distribution of expert knowledge, as well as in the pedagogical inculcation of a mature independence of mind. Research and teaching are sites of critical thinking.

Colleges and universities deserve public support to the extent that American society requires expert knowledge. Expert knowledge has fueled American progress. It has checked ideological fantasies and partisan distortions. It has provided a common ground on which those with competing political visions can come together constructively to address common problems. Without expert knowledge, we lose our ability to know the past, to shape the future, and to acknowledge the differences and similarities we share as human beings.

A modern society that turns its back on knowledge and trusts instead to wishful thinking is fated for a serious crisis. Stalin destroyed Soviet biology for a generation when he insisted that it deny the relevance of genetics because his version of Communist ideology demanded that causal explanations depend upon environmental factors. Dictators always seek to rewrite history and to control science. Democracy requires facts and accessible knowledge.

Opinions are cheap. Everyone has (and is entitled to have) an opinion. But patient disciplinary work is required to understand, compile, and convey the knowledge necessary for educated action. The mission of colleges and universities is to produce and to disseminate this knowledge, which is not a mere commodity to be defined and purchased at the whim of consumers. Higher education serves the common good, not the interests of a few.

In 1915 the founders of the AAUP characterized the university as “an inviolable refuge” from the “tyranny of public opinion,” as “an intellectual experiment station, where new ideas may germinate,” but also as “the conservator of all genuine elements of value in the past thought and life of mankind which are not in the fashion of the moment.” On that basis they asserted “not the absolute freedom of utterance of the individual scholar, but the absolute freedom of thought, of inquiry, of discussion and of teaching, of the academic profession.”²¹ They pledged, as do we, to safeguard freedom of inquiry and of teaching against both covert and overt attacks and to guarantee the long-established practices and principles that define the production of knowledge.

It is up to those who value knowledge to take a stand in the face of those who would assault it, to convey to a broad public the dangers that await us—as individuals and as a society—should that pledge be abandoned. ■

21. 1915 *Declaration of Principles*, in AAUP, *Policy Documents and Reports*, 8–9, 11.