

Dear Administrators: To Protect Your Faculty from Right-Wing Attacks, Follow the Money

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Abstract

At first glance, the large number of recent media controversies concerning public comments made by college faculty appear spontaneous. However, upon closer look, these attacks follow an identical script and originate from the same handful of political and media outlets. Following the money makes it possible to see these attacks on scholars as manufactured by well-funded, well-organized right-wing donors. The Koch brothers, and donors in their orbit, spend considerable money to transform colleges and universities. One part of this strategy includes attacking, marginalizing, and delegitimizing scholars critical of free-market capitalism and white supremacy. This paper examines ten high-profile attacks on faculty, demonstrating the common script across them. It then explores the specific case of Campus Reform's attack on Professor Johnny Williams at Trinity College in 2017, examining specifically how college administrators focused on the content of Williams' posts rather than the political motivations behind the attack. I argue that following the money leads to a more successful political strategy for warding off well-funded, ideologically motivated attacks on faculty.

Trustees, administrators, alumni, students, and even some faculty might be forgiven for thinking that institutions of higher education have suddenly become bastions for professors who harbor crazy communist views, foment hysterical political correctness and trigger warnings, and coddle the whims of their most fragile

students. From reading the news, it appears that American higher education has been reduced to a venue for espousing liberal ideology, as charismatic professors urge their students to commit acts of violence against white people. This narrative has become so powerful that even higher education has become a partisan issue, with 58 percent of Republicans viewing colleges and universities negatively.¹ It is important to understand, however, that this view of higher education has been largely manufactured by a small handful of wealthy, ultra-libertarian donors.

Christopher Newfield powerfully argues that the conservative antitax movement of the 1980s and 1990s actually found it incredibly difficult to defund public universities given that most Americans understood these institutions as playing a central role in creating a large, inclusive, and affluent middle class.² As a result, the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, fueled by politicians and conservative operatives who condemned “postmodernism” and “identity politics” in higher education, became the opening salvo in a campaign to delegitimize—and ultimately defund—the public university.

Today a similar culture war rages, this time led by a closely networked group of institutions created using dark money donations from a small handful of billionaires. These investments are part of a much larger political strategy designed to transform college campuses by punishing critics of free market capitalism and white supremacy. This strategy has included unleashing a maelstrom of viral outrage targeted at specific faculty (often faculty of color). These attacks are often presented as organic expressions of moral outrage. Most often, however, these attacks are instead part of well-organized political strategy designed to influence the ideas that circulate on college campuses.

In this essay, I argue that defending American higher education against the narrative that the academy is “politically correct,” intolerantly liberal, and militantly antiwhite requires attending to the political and economic forces behind this constructed narrative. As I will show, the spasms of moral outrage directed at the “liberal” academy are manufactured by a handful of well-organized and well-funded activist organizations and ideological media outlets. If sunlight is the best disinfectant, defending faculty and campuses from orchestrated attacks must include making the well-funded and covert “outrage machine”³ itself—rather than the particular merits of an individual faculty member’s speech—the main story. While this article focuses on viral attacks on faculty, I should note that strategies shift rapidly, and recent attacks on universities have also

¹ Pew Research Center, “Sharp Partisan Divisions in View of National Institutions,” July 10, 2017, <https://www.people-press.org/2017/07/10/sharp-partisan-divisions-in-views-of-national-institutions/>.

² Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

³ Peter Schmidt, “Higher Education’s Internet Outrage Machine,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 8, 2015, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Higher-Educations-Internet/232879>.

included “free speech” provocations. The same donors, and same organizations, are behind these attacks as well.

While formally addressed to administrators, this article speaks to all college constituencies who find themselves fending off politically motivated right-wing attacks, or who want to defend themselves from such attacks in the future. The first section demonstrates the common script that these attacks follow: a right-wing group captures something said, posted, or tweeted by a faculty member, these statements are then decontextualized and wrapped in moral outrage, broadcast through the right-wing media ecosystem, and eventually find their way to the “mainstream” (or “actual”) media. The second section documents how the same small group of billionaire-funded actors—Campus Reform, the College Fix, Turning Point USA, Breitbart News Network, and others—manufacture these controversies as part of a much larger strategy of strengthening donor influence over universities. The third section offers an autopsy of one attack I witnessed firsthand. In 2017 Campus Reform accused Trinity College professor Johnny Williams of advocating violence against white people.⁴ The discussion in the media, online, and on campus turned immediately toward what Williams did (and did not) say, whether it was appropriate, whether it was protected by academic freedom, and whether the administration’s response was appropriate. Missing from this conversation was a robust and informed discussion of what Campus Reform is, why it targeted Williams, its underlying aims, and who funds the organization. I am quite confident that had the administrative response started with these questions—rather than focusing on the relative merits of Williams’s speech—our institution would have weathered the storm better than it did. The article concludes with some strategic advice for how to respond to such attacks in the future.

Right-Wing Attacks Have a Common Script

Over the past few years American higher education has endured a rash of high-profile, seemingly spontaneous, social media-driven firestorms. However, if one examines the details in each case, clear patterns emerge. Most attacks are leveled against faculty of color, or those whose research and teaching focuses on issues of race. Most start with a handful of organizations explicitly created to monitor and intimidate college faculty (most prominently Campus Reform and the College Fix); from there they travel to sympathetic right-wing websites and news outlets (also created by activist donors committed to undermining public institutions

⁴ For Williams’s account, see Johnny Eric Williams, “The Academic Freedom Double Standard: ‘Freedom’ for Courtiers, Suppression for Critical Scholars,” *Journal of Academic Freedom* 9 (2018), <https://www.aaup.org/JAF9/academic-freedom-double-standard-“freedom”-courtiers-suppression-critical-scholars>.

like universities), before arriving at Fox News. Most attacks that gain traction involve college administrations sanctioning faculty and condemning their speech. To get a sense of the similarities across these attacks, let us look at a sample of the highest-profile examples:

1. In the spring of 2015 tweets from Saida Grundy—recently hired as an assistant professor of sociology and African American studies at Boston University—were posted on the website SoCawledge.com, a blog “funded by a conservative watchdog group.”⁵ On May 7 the College Fix website covered Grundy’s tweets stating that “white masculinity isn’t a problem for america’s colleges, white masculinity is THE problem.”⁶ The *Washington Times* and Fox News picked up the story on May 9, focusing on the tweets “Every MLK week I commit myself to not spending a dime in white-owned businesses” and “Why is white America so reluctant to identify white college males as a problem population?”⁷ BU president Robert A. Brown released a statement saying that Grundy’s comments “reduce individuals to stereotypes on the basis of a broad category such as sex, race or ethnicity.”⁸ On June 4, 2015, Campus Reform followed up on these stories by examining the “same racial animus and hostility towards young white males” in Grundy’s PhD dissertation.⁹

2. On December 24, 2016, now former Drexel associate professor George Ciccariello-Maher parodied the neo-Nazi concept of “white genocide” (that is, the alt-right/Nazi claim that interracial mixing and multiculturalism “dilute” the white race) with the sarcastic tweet “All I Want for Christmas is White Genocide.” This and other tweets were picked up by

⁵ Saida Grundy, “A History of White Violence Tells Us Attacks on Black Academics Are Not Ending (I Know Because It Happened to Me),” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 11 (2017): 1867; Anonymous [Nick Pappas], “Boston University Assistant Professor Saida Grundy Attacks Whites, Makes False Statements on Twitter,” <http://socawledge.com/boston-university-assistant-professor-saida-grundy-attacks-whites-makes-false-statements-on-twitter/>, accessed January 16, 2018.

⁶ Jennifer Kabbany, “Black Studies Prof Says Slavery ‘White People Thing’ and ‘White College Males the Problem Population,’” College Fix, May 7, 2015, <https://www.thecollegefix.com/black-studies-prof-says-slavery-white-people-thing-and-white-college-males-the-problem-population/>.

⁷ Kellan Howell, 2015. “Saida Grundy, Boston University Professor: White Males a ‘Problem Population,’” *Washington Times*, May 9, 2015, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/may/9/saida-grundy-boston-university-professor-white-mal/>; Maxim Lott, “Boston University Prof Flunks ‘White Masculinity’ in Controversial Tweets,” *Fox News U.S.*, May 9, 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2015/05/09/boston-university-prof-flunks-white-masculinity-in-controversial-tweets.html>.

⁸ Scott Jaschik, “Regret over Tweets on Race,” *Inside Higher Ed*, May 13, 2015. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/05/13/professor-center-debate-over-her-tweet-white-male-students-expresses-regret>.

⁹ Peter Hasson, “Prof. Bashed Whites on Social Media, in Dissertation,” Campus Reform, June 4, 2015, <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=6548>.

Breitbart, from where the story quickly spread through other alt-right websites.¹⁰ Drexel released a statement declaring that Ciccariello-Maher's "comments are utterly reprehensible, deeply disturbing and do not in any way reflect the values of the university."¹¹ In October 2017, after a white, male, middle-aged gunman killed fifty-nine concertgoers in Las Vegas, Ciccariello-Maher tweeted that blame for such violence should be placed on "the white supremacist patriarchy, stupid"—a comment he fully explained in a column published in the *Washington Post*.¹² This tweet was picked up by the Daily Caller¹³ and eventually made its way to Fox News and other outlets. The article for the College Fix started by calling Ciccariello-Maher an "instructor [who] previously advocated 'white genocide.'"¹⁴ Drexel placed him on leave due to, in the words of Drexel's spokeswoman, a "growing number of threats directed at Professor George Ciccariello-Maher, and increased concerns about both his safety and the safety of Drexel's community."¹⁵ In December 2017 Ciccariello-Maher announced he was leaving Drexel.¹⁶

3. On February 8, 2017, Breitbart ran a story about a California State University–Fullerton professor of anthropology, Eric Canin, pushing College Republicans who were protesting a rally in opposition to President Donald Trump's travel ban.¹⁷ A video provided

¹⁰ Warner Todd Huston, "Drexel University Professor's Christmas Wish: 'All I Want for Christmas Is White Genocide,'" *Breitbart*, December 25, 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2016/12/25/drexel-univ-professors-christmas-wish-want-christmas-white-genocide/>.

¹¹ Scott Jaschik, "Drexel, Twitter and Academic Freedom," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 3, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/01/03/drexel-issues-new-statement-about-academic-freedom-and-inclusivity>.

¹² George Ciccariello-Maher, "Conservatives Are the Real Campus Thought Police Squashing Academic Freedom," *Washington Post*, October 10, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/10/10/conservatives-are-the-real-campus-thought-police-squashing-academic-freedom/?utm_term=.9a0068f44283.

¹³ Rob Shimshock, "Prof: Vegas Massacre 'Is What Happens When' White People 'Don't Get What They Want,'" *Daily Caller*, October 2, 2017, <http://dailycaller.com/2017/10/02/prof-vegas-massacre-is-what-happens-when-white-people-dont-get-what-they-want/>.

¹⁴ Daniel Payne, "Professor Asks: 'What Makes White Men So Prone' to Mass Shootings?," *College Fix*, November 8, 2017, <https://www.thecollegefix.com/professor-asks-makes-white-men-prone-mass-shootings/>.

¹⁵ Chris Quintana, "Drexel Puts Professor on Leave after Tweet about Las Vegas Draws Conservative Ire," *Chronicle of Higher Education's "The Ticker"*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/drexel-puts-professor-on-leave-after-tweet-about-las-vegas-draws-conservative-ire/120540>.

¹⁶ Andy Thomason, "Drexel Professor Whose Charged Tweets Drew Fire from the Right Will Leave the University," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 28, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Drexel-Professor-Whose-Charged/242124>.

¹⁷ Ariana Rowlands, "Police Investigate after Fullerton Lecturer Allegedly Assaults College Republican," *Breitbart*, February 8, 2017, <http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2017/02/08/college-republican-makes-citizen-arrest-fullerton-professor-assaults-student/>.

by College Republicans was posted on the Campus Reform website by Peter Van Voorhis—a former “Campus Reform Correspondent” and contributor to the *Washington Examiner*, Daily Wire, the College Fix, TheBlaze, and other outlets.¹⁸ Eventually making its way into the *Washington Times* and other right-wing media, the story morphed into Canin punching a student. Canin—who worked on a contingent contract—was terminated from his position and only reinstated after the faculty union demanded arbitration. The arbiter found no evidence that Canin had hit the student.¹⁹

4. On May 8, 2017, the *American Conservative* ran a piece based on a five-year-old radio segment by Tommy Curry, a professor at Texas A&M. Curry was a regular radio commentator on the Redding News Review and, in this segment, discussed how contemporary black political movements have idealized nonviolence, without acknowledging historical examples in which “white vigilantism” demanded black self-defense. The *American Conservative* mischaracterized this discussion as being about “when it is appropriate to kill white people.”²⁰ Within three days, this sensationalized headline quickly spread through The_Donald subreddit, Gateway Pundit, Stormfront, Infowars, Blaze Radio, the *Washington Examiner*, Red Alert Politics, Daily Caller, and Campus Reform.²¹ The coverage caused considerable backlash among alumni and donors, leading university president Michael K. Young to announce that Curry’s comments included “disturbing comments about race and violence” that stood “in stark contrast to Aggie core values. . . . We stand against the advocacy of violence, hate, and killing.”²²

5. On May 25, 2017, Campus Reform ran a story about the commencement address given at Hampshire College by Princeton University professor Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor.²³

¹⁸ Peter Van Voorhis, “CSUF Prof Allegedly Assaults Conservative Students on Campus,” Campus Reform, February 9, 2017, <https://www.campusreform.org/video/?ID=8763>.

¹⁹ Colleen Flaherty, “Correcting the Record,” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 19, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/07/19/cal-state-fullerton-reinstates-lecturer-after-arbitrator-finds-no-evidence-most>.

²⁰ Rod Dreher, “When Is It OK to Kill Whites?,” *American Conservative*, May 8, 2017, www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/when-is-it-ok-to-kill-whites/.

²¹ Steve Kolowich and Brian O’Leary, “How a Challenge to Tommy Curry Set Off a Chain Reaction,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/curry-timeline>.

²² Quoted in Steve Kolowich, “Tough Talk,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Who-s-Left-to-Defend-Tommy/240757>.

²³ Anthony Gockowski, “Prof Tells Grads Trump Is a ‘Racist, Sexist Megalomaniac,’” Campus Reform, May 25, 2017, <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=9232>.

Three days later Fox News ran a story about her “Anti-POTUS Tirade.”²⁴ Based on threats made against her safety, Taylor canceled public talks in Seattle and San Diego.²⁵

6. On June 8, 2017, Campus Reform published a piece criticizing University of Iowa professor Sarah Bond’s essay in the online art forum Hyperallergic, in which she criticized the ways Identity Evropa and other alt-right groups deploy classical Greek imagery. Bond argued that ancient statuary was actually richly painted, and the embrace of white marble statues as embodying Western civilization only emerged during the 1800s among those seeking to conflate “barbarism and color,” on the one hand, and “civility and whiteness,” on the other.²⁶ The Campus Reform piece “remixed” Bond’s argument to read that “white statues are racist,” an interpretation that was picked up by TheBlaze and *National Review* and culminated in death threats and numerous vile emails, Twitter messages, and blog comments.²⁷

7. On June 14, 2017, Campus Reform published a piece on Syracuse University professor Dana Cloud, who, at a counterprotest to the “anti-Sharia law” rally hosted by the anti-Muslim hate group ACT for America, tweeted, “We almost have the fascists in on the run. Syracuse people come down to the federal building to finish them off.” Campus Reform accused Cloud of issuing “a veiled call for violence against a conservative group,” while commenting that she is a “self-proclaimed socialist” and “featured on Turning Point USA’s Professor Watchlist.”²⁸ The story resulted in “a torrent of angry emails and threats” directed at Cloud.²⁹

8. As discussed in greater detail below, on June 20, 2017, Campus Reform misrepresented social media posts by Trinity College professor of sociology Johnny Williams

²⁴ Fox News, “Princeton Professor Goes on Anti-POTUS Tirade,” May 28, 2017, <http://video.foxnews.com/v/5451382191001/>.

²⁵ Fernanda Zamudio-Suárez, “Princeton U. Professor Cancels Lectures after Fox News Labels Her as Anti-Trump,” *Chronicle of Higher Education’s “The Ticker,”* June 1, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/princeton-u-professor-cancels-lectures-after-fox-news-labels-her-as-anti-trump/118743>.

²⁶ Sarah E. Bond, “Why We Need to Start Seeing the Classical World in Color,” Hyperallergic, June 7, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/383776/why-we-need-to-start-seeing-the-classical-world-in-color/>.

²⁷ Chris Quintana, “For One Scholar, an Online Stoning Tests the Limits of Public Scholarship,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 16, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/For-One-Scholar-an-Online/240384>.

²⁸ Neetu Chandak, “Prof Urges Students to ‘Finish Off’ Anti-Sharia Protesters,” Campus Reform, June 14, 2017, <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=9312>.

²⁹ Peter Schmidt, “Professors’ Growing Risk: Harassment for Things They Never Really Said,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 22, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Professors-Growing-Risk-/240424>.

as calling for the killing of white people. The college was closed after numerous threats of violence were called in, and the administration placed Williams on mandatory leave.

9. On July 31, 2017, the *Washington Times* and the College Fix published stories about Montclair State University contract professor Kevin Allred tweeting that Trump was “a fucking joke” and “I wish someone would just shoot him outright.”³⁰ The university denied that Allred worked there, despite an email trail and online faculty profile proving otherwise. Allred replied that his tweets were a “hyperbolic expression” no “worse than what ‘the president’” engages in every day.³¹

10. In August 2017, Mark Bray, visiting professor at Dartmouth University and author of *Antifa: The Anti-fascist Handbook*, was being widely interviewed in the aftermath of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, at which an alt-right sympathizer drove his car into a crowd of counterdemonstrators, killing Heather Heyer and wounding dozens more. In one interview for *Meet the Press*, Bray argued that “we’ve tried ignoring neo-Nazis in the past. We’ve seen how that turned out in the ’20s and ’30s. . . . A lot of people are under attack, and sometimes they need to be able to defend themselves.”³² Campus Reform accused Bray of endorsing violence, prompting a response from Dartmouth president Philip J. Hanlon, who described Bray as “supporting violent protest” and “condemn[ed] anything but civil discourse in the exchange of opinions and ideas. . . . the endorsement of violence in any form is contrary to Dartmouth values.”³³ Hanlon’s statement was issued without informing Bray or engaging with his research.

These attacks share a number of underlying commonalities. First, the same handful of actors are responsible for initiating and circulating these attacks. Second, all the attacks demonstrate a profound failure or unwillingness to consider, or gross neglect of, the actual claims made by the scholar. They instead offer a

³⁰ Michael Jones, “Women’s Studies Scholar Says of Trump: ‘I Wish Someone Would Just Shoot Him Outright,’” College Fix, July 31, 2017, <https://www.thecollegefix.com/post/35045/>; Bradford Richardson, “Women’s Studies Professor Wants Trump Shot,” *Washington Times*, July 31, 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/jul/31/kevin-allred-womens-studies-professor-wants-donald>.

³¹ Scott Jaschik, “Twitter Blowback: Lost Job and Lost Money,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/08/02/montclair-state-removes-courses-adjunct-whose-tweet-became-controversial>.

³² Derek Hawkins, “A Dartmouth Antifa Expert Was Disavowed by His College President for ‘Supporting Violent Protest,’ Angering Many Faculty,” *Washington Post*, August 29, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/08/28/a-dartmouth-antifa-expert-was-disavowed-by-his-college-president-for-supporting-violent-protest-angering-many-faculty>.

³³ Sandor Farkas, “Dartmouth Scholar Endorses Antifa Violence,” Campus Reform, August 21, 2017, <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=9616>.

rush to judgment that neatly fits a predetermined narrative. And, finally, most administrators responded to these attacks by engaging the allegations themselves, namely discussing the merits of what their faculty had said or written. In most cases, colleges and universities never identified the political and ideological motivations undergirding these attacks.

In short, these attacks follow a common logic: stoke outrage in ways that fuel the now-common narrative that college professors are recklessly irresponsible and dangerous. These individual attacks, however, also have a larger political objective. They use these examples to generally discredit colleges and universities, painting them as places that shelter and enable deviant and socially unacceptable ideas. The result is a manufactured narrative wielded by billionaire donors to suggest that parents, students, state governments, foundations, and other funders of higher education demand greater oversight over these apparently untrustworthy and unruly faculty.

To Understand This Common Script . . . Follow the Money

In the above examples, the same few groups keep reappearing. So who are these groups? Who funds them? And why? To answer these questions it is helpful to identify three kinds of groups: those explicitly created and funded to target and monitor faculty, those that amplify these niche attack pieces within the right-wing online ecosystem, and those that push these stories into the national conversation. Let's start with the first category:

Campus Reform

Campus Reform is part of the Leadership Institute (LI), a group that trains conservative and libertarian activists on college campuses. The LI provides training workshops and seminars to conservative student activists, provides funding to bring speakers and organizers to campus, offers a Conservatism 101 curriculum aimed at “bring conservative philosophy to campuses across the country,” and offers training in running college elections and developing conservative campus publications.³⁴ It supports campus conservative groups through its National Field Program, and boasts supporting more than 1,700 college newspaper and student groups.³⁵

³⁴ Leadership Institute, home page, <https://www.leadershipinstitute.org/campus/>, accessed April 23, 2019.

³⁵ SourceWatch, “The Leadership Institute,” https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=The_Leadership_Institute, accessed April 23, 2019.

The Leadership Institute is part of the State Policy Network, a group of think tanks and political groups funded by the Koch donor network.³⁶ The LI's primary source of funding comes from the Donors Capital Fund, Donors Trust, and the Charles Koch Foundation.³⁷ Donor Trust and its affiliated Donors Capital Fund have been called the “the Dark-Money ATM of the Conservative Movement,” taking hundreds of millions of dollars from donors and channeling these anonymized funds into groups advocating free-market and ultralibertarian political objectives.³⁸ In 2016 the Leadership Institute spent \$15.8 million on its political campus activities,³⁹ much of it coming from dark-money sources.

Campus Reform, one project overseen by the Leadership Institute, claims that “liberal bias is rampant on America’s college campuses” and hires student correspondents that it recruits with language like “Get paid to hold your school accountable!” and “Be the eyes and ears on your campus. Launch your investigative journalism career!”⁴⁰ Campus Reform refers to “victories” as those situations “in which a college changes a policy, fires someone, or otherwise responds to concerns raised by the reporting on its site.”⁴¹ It produces stories with sensationalized headlines, and presents material in an ominous black, gray, and red palette. Reproductions of documents—such as screenshots of social media media—are emblazoned with a menacing Campus Reform logo. Campus Reform solicits tips from “the Leadership Institute’s network of nearly 1,600 conservative groups on college campuses,” and pays so-called student journalists fifty dollars to report on their own institutions.⁴²

Why would the Koch donor network fund the Leadership Institute and Campus Reform? Since the 1970s Charles and David Koch have created (and funded) a range of academic, journalistic, legal, policy, judicial, and advocacy organizations explicitly designed to use their vast wealth to push federal and state policies toward greater deregulation, larger tax cuts, and drastic reductions in social spending—a set of economic priorities described by critics as “property supremacy”⁴³ and “ultra-free-market.”⁴⁴ Unable to convince

³⁶ SourceWatch, “The Leadership Institute.”

³⁷ Pam Vogel, “The Conservative Dark-Money Groups Infiltrating Campus Politics,” *Media Matters*, March 29, 2017, <https://www.mediamatters.org/research/2017/03/29/conservative-dark-money-groups-infiltrating-campus-politics/215822#cr>.

³⁸ Vogel, “The Conservative Dark-Money Groups.”

³⁹ SourceWatch, “The Leadership Institute.”

⁴⁰ Leadership Institute, “What’s Going On in the National Field Program?,” <https://www.leadershipinstitute.org/campus/>, accessed April 23, 2019.

⁴¹ Schmidt, “Higher Education’s Internet Outrage Machine.”

⁴² Schmidt, “Higher Education’s Internet Outrage Machine.”

⁴³ Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017).

⁴⁴ Theda Skocpol and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, “The Koch Network and Republican Party Extremism,” *Perspective on Politics* 14, no. 3 (2016): 681–99.

majorities of voters of the merits of these ideas, the Kochs created and funded a vast integrated network of institutions designed to change the national conversation toward their ultralibertarian political and economic priorities.⁴⁵ A sampling of these institutions include Americans for Prosperity, the American Enterprise Institute, the Federalist Society, the Heritage Foundation, Americans for Tax Reform, the American Legislative Exchange Council, and the Heartland Institute.⁴⁶ Donor Trust and Donors Capital Fund also fund student groups on college campuses (including Young Americans for Liberty and Students for Liberty) as well as academic centers (such as George Mason University's Mercatus Center and the Institute for Humane Studies).⁴⁷

This vast network cannot function without both academic research legitimizing far-right ideas and an ideologically motivated talent pool to populate this vast integrated network of institutions. Charles Koch's strategist Richard Fink described universities as creating the "intellectual raw materials" necessary to achieve social transformation.⁴⁸ In many instances, faculty, students, and university administrations have resisted Koch-funded centers and programs on campus, maintaining control over faculty governance and autonomy over the curriculum, classroom, and research. Attacks on faculty, and more recently "campus free speech" provocations (funded by the same organizations), are part of a strategy seeking to delegitimize the academy and, in doing so, opening this key institution to greater donor influence over academic programs, centers, and curricula. This handful of ultraright billionaires sees their donations as financial investments in a long-term political struggle to eviscerate the state's capacity to enact redistributive and regulative policies. To this end, they see universities as critical institutions that need to be occupied, pacified, and repurposed.

It is not surprising, therefore, that other organizations responsible for manufacturing faculty attacks are also funded by this same right-wing, ultralibertarian political movement.

The College Fix

The Student Free Press Association oversees the College Fix, a website that operates as a smaller version of Campus Reform. The Student Free Press Association is funded by DonorsTrust and Donors Capital Fund,

⁴⁵ Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez, "The Koch Network"; SourceWatch, "Koch Brothers: The Center for Media and Democracy 2018," https://http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/Koch_Brothers, accessed February 15, 2019.

⁴⁶ Andy Kroll, "Exposed: The Dark-Money ATM of the Conservative Movement," *Mother Jones*, February 5, 2013.

⁴⁷ Vogel, "The Conservative Dark-Money Groups."

⁴⁸ Alex Kocht, "Charles Koch Gave \$50 Million to Higher Ed in 2016: What Did He Buy?," *International Business Times*, December 8, 2017.

and enjoys ties to the DeVos family.⁴⁹ Its \$400,000 budget makes it possible to hire three editors who work with fifty student correspondents across the country.⁵⁰

Turning Point USA

Turning Point USA (TPUSA) claims to be simply a “student movement for free markets and limited government.”⁵¹ However, its major focus has been on combating so-called liberal bias on college campuses, institutions that founder Charlie Kirk calls “islands of totalitarianism.”⁵² TPUSA publishes the “Professor Watchlist,” which seeks to highlight the “radical agenda in lecture halls.”⁵³ The watchlist is compiled based on stories circulated by Campus Reform, the College Fix, David Horowitz’s Freedom Center, Project Veritas, and Fox News.⁵⁴ TPUSA has actively taken over student governments at forty colleges and universities in 2016–17 and is committing \$2.2 million to expand to 122 campuses.⁵⁵

Billionaires Bruce Rauner and Foster Friess appear to be the primary funders of Turning Point USA and largely responsible for the group’s budget increases from \$52,000 in 2012 to \$5.5 million in 2016.⁵⁶ By 2017 the budget reached \$8 million, and likely included funding from the fossil fuel industry (which might explain why TPUSA organizes against carbon disinvestment efforts on college campuses).⁵⁷ TPUSA is also a partner of the Leadership Institute, as well as other advocacy groups affiliated with the Koch donor network.⁵⁸

Breitbart News

Although not part of the Koch network, and often hostile to positions advocated by the Koch brothers (especially on issues of immigration and mass incarceration), Breitbart News has become a megaphone for amplifying attacks originating with Campus Reform and the College Fix. Formerly headed by Steve Bannon, chief executive of Trump’s presidential campaign and later White House chief strategist, Breitbart received substantial funding from hedge fund billionaire Robert Mercer. Known for his “extreme views on small

⁴⁹ Vogel, “The Conservative Dark-Money Groups.”

⁵⁰ Schmidt, “Higher Education’s Internet Outrage Machine.”

⁵¹ Turning Point USA, home page, <https://www.tpusa.com>, accessed April 23, 2019.

⁵² Jane Mayer, “A Conservative Nonprofit That Seeks to Transform College Campuses Faces Allegations of Racial Bias and Illegal Campaign Activity,” *New Yorker*, December 21, 2017.

⁵³ Turning Point USA, “Professor Watchlist,” <https://www.professorwatchlist.org>, accessed April 23, 2019.

⁵⁴ Vogel, “The Conservative Dark-Money Groups.”

⁵⁵ Mayer, “A Conservative Nonprofit”; Michael Vasquez, “Inside a Stealth Plan for Political Influence,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 7, 2017.

⁵⁶ Vasquez, “Inside a Stealth Plan.”

⁵⁷ Mayer, “A Conservative Nonprofit.”

⁵⁸ Vogel, “The Conservative Dark-Money Groups.”

government and wealth,” Mercer believes, as one colleague explained, “that human beings have no inherent value other than how much money they make. . . . If someone is on welfare they have negative value. If he earns a thousand times more than a schoolteacher, then he’s a thousand times more valuable.”⁵⁹ Robert, and his daughter Rebekah, funded not only Trump’s presidential campaign but also the United Kingdom’s pro-Brexit campaign and Cambridge Analytica.⁶⁰ With Mercer funding, Breitbart News is now one of the largest media organizations on the Internet, and the self-proclaimed home of the Alt-Right.

Washington Times

The Reverend Sun Myung Moon, who professes a religious calling to fight against communism, owns the Washington, DC, newspaper. The paper played a major role during the culture wars of the 1990s and enjoys a long track record of misleading and inaccurate reporting.⁶¹ The *Washington Times* contributes to the American Legislative Exchange Council, a Koch organization that develops model antitax, antiwelfare, antilabor, antienvironmental, and antiregulation legislation.⁶²

Daily Caller

Many stories critical of college professors circulate through the Daily Caller, a media platform created by Tucker Carlson and former Dick Cheney aide, Neil Patel. This website has proven highly profitable in part due to a dubious funding arrangement. Most of the Daily Caller’s fifty reporters work for the tax-exempt, nonprofit Daily Caller News Foundation. This 501(c)(3) generates most of the content for the for-profit

⁵⁹ Kyle Swenson, “Rebekah Mercer, the Billionaire Backer of Bannon and Trump, Chooses Sides,” *Washington Post*, January 5, 2018.

⁶⁰ Jane Mayer, “The Reclusive Hedge-Fund Tycoon behind the Trump Presidency,” *New Yorker*, March 17, 2017. “Cambridge Analytica, a political data firm hired by President Trump’s 2016 election campaign, gained access to private information on more than 50 million Facebook users. The firm offered tools that could identify the personalities of American voters and influence their behavior”; Kevin Granville, “Facebook and Cambridge Analytica: What You Need to Know as Fallout Widens,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/technology/facebook-cambridge-analytica-explained.html>.

⁶¹ Heidi Beirich and Bob Moser, “The *Washington Times* Has History of Hyped Stories, Shoddy Reporting and Failing to Correct Errors,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, Summer 2003, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/washington-times-has-history-hyped-stories-shoddy-reporting-and-failing-correct-errors>.

⁶² SourceWatch, “*Washington Times*,” *Center for Media and Democracy*, https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Washington_Times, accessed April 14, 2019.

media site.⁶³ As a result, tax-deductible donations to the Daily Caller News Foundation—\$3 million in 2015, for example—serve to subsidize the for-profit business.⁶⁴ Between 2012 and 2017 the Koch Family Foundation contributed \$2.68 million to Daily Caller News Foundation. Other donors include: Charles Koch Institute (\$30,000), Donor Trust (\$130,000), and other foundations closely aligned with the Koch donor network, including the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation (\$100,000 in 2014), Diana Davis Spencer Foundation (\$150,000 in 2015), and Searle Freedom Trust (\$260,000 between 2014 and 2015).⁶⁵

Fox News

Fox News is often the final destination of the various stories manufactured in this ultralibertarian, billionaire-funded echo chamber. Once a professor's comments have been stripped of their actual content and turned into hyperbolic evidence of anticonservative bias, they are ready for prime time. Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson have become the primary vectors for distributing attacks against college professors. Since 2016, after the firing of Roger Ailes for sexual predation, Hannity and Carlson increasingly drive Fox's messaging.⁶⁶

Understanding how these various groups are funded, and what motivates them politically, helps us better understand the attacks faculty face. These attacks are clearly against faculty who engage in conversations about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and whiteness. The objective of these “terroristic targeting and smear campaigns” is to “pressure” scholars “to remain silent, self-censor themselves, or moderate their speech, teaching, and writing about systemic oppression.”⁶⁷ Attacks on faculty are also designed to fundamentally delegitimize the university as a particular kind of institution. Billionaire libertarians fund these attacks not only to intimidate critical scholarship but also to win greater donor influence over higher education in generally. In short, these attacks are part of a broader claim: *We* (the wealthy) should determine the speech on campus, not *you* (the faculty).

Unfortunately, many administrators have responded to these attacks by debating, and most often condemning, the content of their faculty members' speech. Such responses not only encourage greater self-

⁶³ Callum Borchers, “Charity Doubles as a Profit Stream at the Daily Caller News Foundation,” *Washington Post*, June 2, 2017.

⁶⁴ Borchers, “Charity Doubles as a Profit Stream.”

⁶⁵ SourceWatch, “*The Daily Caller News Foundation*,” Center for Media and Democracy, https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=The_Daily_Caller_News_Foundation#Funding, accessed August 28, 2019.

⁶⁶ Jane Mayer, “The Making of the Fox News White House,” *New Yorker*, March 4, 2019.

⁶⁷ Williams, “The Academic Freedom Double Standard,” 3.

ensorship among critically-minded scholars but also ignores the broader political strategy at work. In doing so, administrators, faculty, students, and the wider public miss the fact that these attacks are strategies deployed by a small, well-funded political network organized to fundamentally transform society, a transformation that requires fundamentally remaking colleges and universities.

Looking at a particular case makes it possible to better see the limitations that occur when administrators respond by debating the merits of faculty speech, rather than articulating the true motivations behind these attacks.

An Autopsy of a Right-Wing Attack: The Case of Professor Johnny Williams

On June 20, 2017, Campus Reform published a piece accusing Trinity professor Johnny Williams of calling for the death of white people. The following day the story ran in Breitbart below an image of Congressman Steve Scalise after he had been shot on June 14 in Alexandria, Virginia, at a congressional Republican baseball game. The article included the headline “Trinity College Professor on Congressional Baseball Shooting: ‘Let Them F*cking Die.’”⁶⁸ The story also appeared on the Daily Caller, TheBlaze, in the *Washington Times*, and other right-wing outlets before eventually reaching Tucker Carlson’s show.⁶⁹ Turning Point USA also placed Williams on its “Professor Watchlist,” citing the piece published by Campus Reform.⁷⁰

Trinity College campus was closed on June 21 after individuals called campus to threaten violence, which only fueled additional national coverage. Williams left the state after receiving threats against him and his family, and the administration suspended him against his will.⁷¹ The Trinity College AAUP chapter (of which I was the president) and the national AAUP vigorously defended Williams, who was later exonerated after a review process. In subsequent emails Trinity acknowledged that the incident caused \$200,000 in lost donations and the withdrawal of sixteen students.⁷² In the end, Campus Reform’s attack successfully sent the

⁶⁸ Tom Ciccotta, “Trinity College Professor on Congressional Baseball Shooting: ‘Let Them F*cking Die,’” *Breitbart*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2017/06/21/trinity-college-professor-on-congressional-baseball-shooting-let-them-fcking-die/>.

⁶⁹ Tucker Carlson is an alumnus of Trinity College.

⁷⁰ Kathleen Megan, “Attacks on Trinity Professors: Free Speech or Intimidation?,” *Hartford Courant*, June 25, 2017, <https://www.courant.com/education/hc-trinity-professor-national-perspective-20170622-story.html>.

⁷¹ Kathleen Megan, “Trinity Puts Professor On Leave Following Social Media Fire Storm,” *Hartford Courant*, June 26, 2017, <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-trinity-professor-placed-on-leave-0627-20170626-story.html>.

⁷² Joanne Berger-Sweeney, “President Joanne Berger-Sweeney’s Statements Concerning Professor Johnny Williams,” July 31, 2017, <https://www.trincoll.edu/NewsEvents/NewsArticles/pages/WilliamsUpdatesSummer2017.aspx>.

message that a black professor who openly condemns white supremacy should be considered the cause of potential physical, and real financial harm.

The awesome speed and overwhelming character of this attack, however, stemmed from the fact that this “controversy” was completely manufactured within a small, ultra-libertarian-funded media ecosystem. This political operation is designed to discredit and undermine the social legitimacy of black scholars like Williams but also, in the process, of colleges and universities more generally. To this end, Williams’s actual words got willfully rewritten (*not* merely “misinterpreted”) to fit a well-worn (and well-funded) script of an out-of-control and potentially dangerous academic in need of greater external constraint.

The initial Campus Reform piece, written by Anthony Gockowski, claimed that “Trinity College Professor Johnny Eric Williams appeared to endorse the idea that first responders to last week’s congressional shooting should have let the victims ‘fucking die’ because they are white.”⁷³ The operative phrase is “appeared to endorse” because, if one takes the time to read Williams’s social media post, and actually engage with his argument, it becomes painfully evident that this is not the case. However, the mere mention that Williams “appears” to have said something hyperbolic nonetheless created the intended social media outrage.

Campus Reform selected three posts (among thousands) from Williams’s Facebook page. The first was a reposted article from June 16 titled “Let Them Fucking Die” written by the anonymous Son of Baldwin and first published on the blogging platform Medium.⁷⁴ The other two posts were Williams’s responses to the shooting of Charleena Lyles in Seattle. The Son of Baldwin piece starts with the observation that Representative Scalise, who associates with white supremacist groups and owns a long anti-LGBTQ legislative record, was saved by a queer African American security guard, Crystal Griner. This follows a long, established pattern: black and queer people repeatedly risk their lives to save white people, without receiving social benefits for doing so. Campus Reform never addresses the actual content of the lengthy and thoughtful argument. Instead, Gockowski evacuated the argument of its meaning, cherry-picking passages that serve the political and ideological project of Campus Reform and the Koch-funded Leadership Institute.

Gockowski’s piece then tenuously connects this vacated reading of the Son of Baldwin article to two posts Williams wrote later in the day, one using the article title as a hashtag. The Campus Reform hit piece never intended to examine the arguments explored, implicated, or debated within these three pieces, or to

⁷³ Anthony Gockowski, “Prof Calls Whites ‘Inhuman Assholes,’ Says ‘Let Them Die,’” Campus Reform, June 20, 2017, <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=9334>.

⁷⁴ Son of Baldwin, “Let Them Fucking Die,” Medium, June 16, 2017, <https://medium.com/@SonofBaldwin/let-them-fucking-die-c316eee34212>.

engage with Williams’s scholarship on the topic of race and racism in America.⁷⁵ Nor does the Campus Reform article mention the broader academic and popular discussion about white supremacy.⁷⁶

Once published, the Campus Reform “story” circulated rapidly through the right-wing media ecosystem, becoming even further stripped of content. The June 20 Daily Caller repeats the Campus Reform article nearly word for word.⁷⁷ Similarly, the June 28 *Washington Times* version included a picture of people gathered near the baseball field where the shooting took place.⁷⁸ The article again repeats the Campus Reform story nearly verbatim, even demonstrating its own lack of reporting when it notes: “The educational watchdog Campus Reform and TheBlaze both reached out to the professor for comment Tuesday to no avail.”⁷⁹ In other words, the *Washington Times* did not contact either Williams or Trinity but merely repeated Campus Reform’s account. This version ends with the most provocative material from the Son of Baldwin piece cited in a way that seemingly attributes the words to Williams—or leaving it vague enough as to encourage such a misreading.

On June 21, the president of Trinity, Joanne Berger-Sweeney, issued a statement noting that “To be clear, both personally and on behalf of the College that I represent, I do not condone hate speech or calls to incite violence.”⁸⁰ After discussing the Medium post, Berger-Sweeney stated, “The piece culminated with a call to show indifference to the lives of bigots. That call was reprehensible, and any such suggestion is abhorrent and wholly contrary to Trinity’s values.”⁸¹ On his June 22 Fox show Tucker Carlson called Williams “an open bigot, who singles out and torments kids based on their race.” He ranted about the “left” ruining his alma mater using the “usual combination of lower standards, frivolous standards, low-grade

⁷⁵ For example, Johnny Williams, “Talking About Race without Talking About Race: Color Blindness in Genomics,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 59 no. 11 (2015): 1496–1517; and Williams, *Decoding Racial Ideology in Genomics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016).

⁷⁶ See Williams, *The Academic Freedom Double Standard*.

⁷⁷ Justin Caruso, “Professor Calls White People Inhuman,” Daily Caller, June 20, 2017, <https://dailycaller.com/2017/06/20/professor-calls-white-people-inhuman>, accessed August 28, 2019.

⁷⁸ Douglas Ernst, “Trinity College Professor Calls White People ‘Inhuman’: ‘Let Them F-ing Die,’” *Washington Times*, June 28, 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/aug/2/trinity-college-johnny-eric-williams-anti-white-f-> (since removed as requested by Trinity College).

⁷⁹ Douglas Ernst, “Trinity College Professor Calls White People ‘Inhuman’: ‘Let Them F-ing Die,’” *Washington Times*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/jun/21/johnny-eric-williams-trinity-college-professor-cal>.

⁸⁰ Joanne Berger-Sweeney, “Statement Regarding Social Media Posts by Faculty Member,” Trinity College, June 21, 2017, www.trincoll.edu/AboutTrinity/CommunityLetters/Pages/StatementSocialMedia21June17.aspx.

⁸¹ Berger-Sweeney, “Statement Regarding Social Media Posts.”

authoritarianism, not to mention the addition of semi-literate buffoons like Professor Johnny Williams . . . Would you send your kids?”⁸²

On June 26 Berger-Sweeney announced that Trinity was placing Williams on leave “effective immediately” and that the dean of faculty would conduct a review. In response, Trinity’s AAUP chapter released a statement demanding that the administration “issue: a public apology to Johnny Williams; a denouncement of the attacks against him; and offer an unequivocal endorsement of academic freedom.”⁸³ The national AAUP also issued a letter condemning the administration’s decision, pointing out that “the action taken against Professor Williams is entirely at odds with normative standards of academic due process.”⁸⁴

On July 14, after considerable campus organizing by the AAUP chapter and news that the national AAUP was sending a committee of inquiry to campus, the dean of faculty issued his report. This report examined Williams’s speech, and the relevant policies in the Faculty Manual and Employee Handbook, before exonerating him of all wrongdoing.⁸⁵ However, in her public announcement of this report, Berger-Sweeney once again returned to the merits of Williams’s speech:

Let me be clear: While I support Professor Williams’s right to express his opinions . . . Nevertheless, the words used in that hashtag not only offend me personally, they also contradict our fundamental institutional values and run counter to our efforts to bridge divides and to promote understanding⁸⁶

The three official statements from the president, and the dean’s report, all focused on whether Williams actually called for the death of white people, and whether such speech is protected by academic freedom. Missing from the conversation was a clear analysis of who Campus Reform is, the political and ideological motivations behind the attacks, and a clear understanding of whose funding made it possible to transform a

⁸² Tucker Carlson, “The Left Wrecked My Alma Mater, Trinity College,” *Fox News*, June 22, 2017, <https://video.foxnews.com/v/5480749711001/#sp=show-clips>, accessed August 28, 2019.

⁸³ Hank Reichman, “Trinity AAUP Statement on the Decision to Place Professor Johnny Williams on Leave,” *Academe Blog*, June 27, 2017, <https://academeblog.org/2017/06/27/trinity-aaup-statement-on-the-decision-to-place-professor-johnny-williams-on-leave/>.

⁸⁴ Hans-Joerg Tiede, letter to Joanne Berger-Sweeney, AAUP, June 27, 2017, <https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/files/Trinity-Williams-6-27-17.pdf>, accessed August 28, 2019.

⁸⁵ Tim Cresswell, “Review of the June 18, 2017, Actions of Professor Johnny Williams and College Policy,” Trinity College, July 2017, <https://www.trincoll.edu/AboutTrinity/offices/president/Documents/FinalWilliamsReport12July17.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Joanne Berger-Sweeney, “Statement and Report Concerning Professor Johnny Williams,” Trinity College, July 14, 2017, <https://www.trincoll.edu/AboutTrinity/CommunityLetters/Pages/ProfWilliams14July17.aspx>.

gross and willful misreading of a handful of social media posts into a “crisis” that played out on national television.

How might we respond better? A number of helpful articles have examined practical, interpersonal strategies.⁸⁷ The suggestions laid out below, however, speak more broadly to questions of institutional strategy.

How to Respond Differently

Campus Reform, the College Fix, and other watchdog outlets, as well as those platforms that circulate their content, have a political and ideological objective in discrediting faculty—especially those who critique white supremacy, patriarchy, and free-market capitalism. Because the organizations launching attacks on faculty are politically motivated, they have no actual intention of engaging with the actual content of academic speech. As such, administrations should not ground their response in an interpretation of what their faculty member did (and didn’t) say. Instead, administrations should respond by “following the money.” Namely, they should make clear who is mounting the attacks, and why. When the issue was framed as “Did Professor Williams actually call for killing white people?” then Campus Reform has already won. Instead, administrations, faculty, students, alumni, journalists, and the broader public should respond by clearly naming who is carrying out the attack, why, and then offer unconditional support for their faculty. Here are some guidelines to consider:

Trust the faculty being attacked.

The groups originating these attacks seek to undermine the credibility of specific academics. Therefore, when a group like Campus Reform publishes a story attacking a faculty member, everyone should assume that this is a politically motivated piece of hackery, and treat it as such. Giving Campus Reform the benefit of the doubt, often at the expense of a faculty member of color, is itself a form of white supremacy.⁸⁸

Chancellor Kent Syverud of Syracuse University provided a perfect example of an administrator trusting his faculty. In response to the attack on Dana Cloud described above, Syverud wrote that “Cloud’s statement ‘is susceptible to multiple interpretations,’” that he “rejected calls to denounce, censor, or dismiss her,” and

⁸⁷ See, for example, Eric Anthony Grollman, “Scholars under Attack,” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 9, 2015, <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2015/07/09/essay-how-support-scholars-under-attack>; and Matthew Boedy, “Responding to Conservative Watchdogs,” *Academe Blog*, April 19, 2019, <https://academeblog.org/2019/04/19/responding-to-conservative-watchdogs/>.

⁸⁸ I examine this argument in Isaac Kamola, “Crashing the Academic Conversation,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 9, 2017.

“Our faculty must be able to say and write things—including things that provoke some or make others uncomfortable—up to the very limits of the law.”⁸⁹

Publicly defend academic freedom and faculty governance.

Higher education is premised on academic freedom, which secures the ability of faculty to teach classes and produce knowledge without fear of financial, political, or institutional retaliation. Academic freedom is grounded in the premise that, because of their training, scholars have attained a level of expertise, reviewed by their peers, which contributes to meaningful academic and social dialogue. It presumes that having a wide range of voices engaged in topics of social concern—no matter how controversial—produces the best outcomes.

As Joan Scott reminds us, however, it is important to maintain the difference between academic freedom and free speech. Whereas free speech protects “one’s opinion, however unfounded, however ungrounded,” academic freedom is a norm of professionalism that involves “thoughtful, critical articulation of ideas, the demonstration of proof based on rigorous examination of evidence, the distinction between true and false, between careful and sloppy work, the exercise of reasoned judgment.”⁹⁰ While Campus Reform and the College Fix have every right to produce hackneyed misrepresentations of faculty speech, within the academy such writing cannot be given equal weight as the statements and utterances of faculty, speaking on topics they have spent decades studying. As Scott notes, “This is not elitism but expertise, the production of knowledge informed by disciplined research.”⁹¹ Just as one does not crowdsource cures to infectious diseases, society should listen to faculty—not online mobs—if it wants to understand, for example, “the history and sociology of race, gender, sexuality, and class.”⁹²

In contrast, the right-wing donor class has a political, ideological, and economic interest in discrediting their critics. Unleashing well-funded right-wing attacks against college faculty is one strategy to coerce an academic institution into adopting the values preferred by the donors funding the attacks. Ultra-libertarian donors have successfully used the language of “free speech” as the lever to create a false equivalency between the speech of faculty and their own ideological and donor-funded attacks.⁹³ If free speech, rather than

⁸⁹ Schmidt, “Professors’ Growing Risk.”

⁹⁰ Joan W. Scott, “On Free Speech and Academic Freedom,” *Journal of Academic Freedom* 8 (2017): 4.

⁹¹ Scott, “On Free Speech,” 7.

⁹² Scott, “On Free Speech,” 8.

⁹³ As funders (and beneficiaries) of the *Citizens United* Supreme Court case, these libertarian donors view their financial investments as speech. Therefore, when demanding greater “free speech” on campus, they are

academic freedom, is the primary concern, then Johnny Williams, Campus Reform, and Milo Yiannopoulos all have the equal right to contribute to a conversation about race. However, rather than entertaining these different interpretations, the response should be: “Campus Reform is a bully that, using dark money, seeks to determine the kinds of conversations taking place in the classroom and in scholarly debate. A free society requires rigorous and free inquiry, not threats and harassment from well-funded external agitators.”

Refer to these events as attacks. Name the attacker.

I used to refer to the summer of 2017 at Trinity College as “the Johnny Williams incident.” One day Williams corrected me, saying, “Hey, this was never about me. This was always about Campus Reform.” This is a powerful insight and draws needed attention to the politics around naming the attackers. Grundy similarly argues that using the language of “attack” acknowledges the violence experienced by faculty during these extreme, nonstop, racialized, and gendered waves of malice—a continuation of the Jim Crow policing of black bodies in traditionally “white” spaces.⁹⁴

Organizations like Campus Reform, the College Fix, and Turning Points USA exist to “combat” the university as currently organized. If students, faculty, and administrators ignore the underlying political motivations behind these attacks and seek instead to walk some fine line created by parsing an apologetic middle ground, we effectively give merit to weaponized claims created to undermine the academic freedom of faculty. Furthermore, when administrations sanction faculty based on these attacks, they demonstrate that these strategies work.

The best response is a counterattack; make the story about the groups orchestrating these incidents. In particular, draw out the connections between dark-money donors and the political, ideological, and economic motives undergirding these attacks.

Be (preemptively) organized.

At Trinity it was clear that neither faculty nor administration had any idea how to handle the Campus Reform attack. The response was muddled and created institutional distrust, as the administration tried to have it both ways: supporting academic freedom in private yet publicly admonishing Williams to placate donors. Instead, administrations should develop strategies for responding to these attacks, and work with faculty governance

essentially articulating a vision of greater donor spending (that is, speech) throughout all aspects of higher education.

⁹⁴ Grundy, “A History of White Violence,” 1867.

organizations to develop clear protocols. At Trinity, for example, the administration invented its own ad hoc response in violation of policies laid out in the faculty manual. Preemptive planning by administrations, and steadfast defense of academic freedom among faculty, can increase the chances that institutions will not capitulate to—and therefore validate—these attacks.

Faculty should also never assume that administrators will publicly and unconditionally protect their academic freedom (unless forced to do so). At Trinity our AAUP chapter released statements, fielded petitions, held forums, contacted media, and put pressure on the administration not to capitulate to the considerable pressures calling for the firing of Williams. Because these attacks are organized and political, an organized and political response is required.

* * * * *

“Follow the money” is the best strategy for defending against these right-wing attacks. When the public learns about dark money on campus, they are often repulsed. Therefore, rather than letting an outlet like Campus Reform define the discussion, the story should be about how a handful of billionaire donors use their resources to shape conversations on college campuses. When this argument becomes the main line of response, then the right-wing shouting about “snowflakes,” “trigger warnings,” and “free speech” becomes seen for what it actually is: a cynically political ploy. I have faith that creating a stark contrast between the protection of academic freedom and dark-money efforts to undermine it creates a firm foundation upon which to defend the university against those who, like Charles Koch, view higher education is little more than an obstacle to their desired political and economic outcomes.

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