

OPINION

New faculty-led organization at Harvard will defend academic freedom

The new Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard is devoted to free inquiry, intellectual diversity, and civil discourse. Leaders are diverse in politics, demographics, disciplines, and opinions but united in their concern for academic freedom.

By **Steven Pinker and Bertha Madras** Updated April 12, 2023, 11:33 a.m.



Pedestrians walked through Harvard Yard in Cambridge.

ADAM GLANZMAN/PHOTOGRAPHER: ADAM GLANZMAN/BLOO

Confidence in American higher education is sinking faster than for any other institution, with barely half of Americans believing it has a positive effect on the country.

No small part in this disenchantment is the impression that universities are repressing differences of opinion, like the inquisitions and purges of centuries past. It has been stoked by viral videos of professors being mobbed, cursed, heckled into silence, and sometimes assaulted, and it is vindicated by some alarming numbers. According to the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, between 2014 and 2022 there were 877 attempts to punish scholars for expression that is, or in public contexts would be, protected by the First Amendment. Sixty percent resulted in actual sanctions, including 114 incidents of censorship and 156 firings (44 of them tenured professors) — more than during the McCarthy era. Worse, for every scholar who is punished, many more self-censor, knowing they could be next. It's no better for the students, a majority of whom say that the campus climate prevents them from saying things they believe.

The embattled ideal of academic freedom is not just a matter of the individual rights of professors and students. It's baked into the mission of a university, which is to seek and share the truth — *veritas*, as our university, Harvard, boasts on its seal.

The reason that a truth-seeking institution must sanctify free expression is straightforward. No one is infallible or omniscient. Mortal humans begin in ignorance of everything and are saddled with cognitive biases that make the search for knowledge

arduous. These include overconfidence in their own rectitude, a preference for confirmatory over disconfirmatory evidence, and a drive to prove that their own alliance is smarter and nobler than their rivals. The only way that our species has managed to learn and progress is by a process of conjecture and refutation: Some people venture ideas, others probe whether they are sound, and in the long run the better ideas prevail.

Any community that disables this cycle by repressing disagreement is doomed to chain itself to error, as we are reminded by the many historical episodes in which authorities enforced dogmas that turned out to be flat wrong. An academic establishment that stifles debate betrays the privileges that the nation grants it and is bound to provide erroneous guidance on vital issues like pandemics, violence, gender, and inequality. Even when the academic consensus is almost certainly correct, as with vaccines and climate change, skeptics can understandably ask, “Why should we trust the consensus, if it comes out of a clique that brooks no dissent?”

There are many reasons to think that repression of academic freedom is systemic and must be actively resisted. To start with, the very concept of freedom of expression is anything but intuitively obvious. What is intuitively obvious is that the people who disagree with us are spreading dangerous falsehoods and must be silenced for the greater good. (Of course the other guys believe the same thing, with the sides switched.)

The counter-intuitiveness of academic freedom is easily reinforced by several campus dynamics. The intellectual commons is vulnerable to the collective action problem of concentrated benefits and diffuse costs: A cadre of activists may

find meaning and purpose in their cause and be willing to stop at nothing to prosecute it, while a larger number may disagree but feel they have other things to do with their time than push back. The activists command an expanding arsenal of asymmetric warfare, including the ability to disrupt events, the power to muster physical or electronic mobs on social media, and a willingness to smear their targets with crippling accusations of racism, sexism, or transphobia in a society that rightly abhors them. An exploding bureaucracy for policing harassment and discrimination has professional interests that are not necessarily aligned with the production and transmission of knowledge. Department chairs, deans, and presidents strive to minimize bad publicity and may proffer whatever statement they hope will make the trouble go away. Meanwhile, the shrinking political diversity of faculty threatens to lock in the regime for generations to come.

One kind of resistance will surely make things worse: attempts by politicians to counter left-wing muscle with right-wing muscle by stipulating the content of education through legislation or by installing cronies in hostile takeovers of boards of trustees. The coin of the realm in academia ought to be persuasion and debate, and the natural protagonists ought to be the faculty. They can hold universities accountable to the commitments to academic freedom that are already enshrined in faculty policies, handbooks, and in the case of public universities, the First Amendment.

In this spirit, we have joined with 50 colleagues to create a new [Council on Academic Freedom](#) at Harvard. It's not about us. For many years we have each expressed strong and often unorthodox opinions with complete freedom and with the

support, indeed warm encouragement, of our colleagues, deans, and presidents. Yet we know that not all is well for more vulnerable colleagues and students. Harvard ranks 170th out of 203 colleges in FIRE's Free Speech Rankings, and we know of cases of disinvitation, sanctioning, harassment, public shaming, and threats of firing and boycotts for the expression of disfavored opinions. More than half of our students say they are uncomfortable expressing views on controversial issues in class.

The Council is a faculty-led organization that is devoted to free inquiry, intellectual diversity, and civil discourse. We are diverse in politics, demographics, disciplines, and opinions but united in our concern that academic freedom needs a defense team. Our touchstone is the "Free Speech Guidelines" adopted by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences in 1990, which declares, "Free speech is uniquely important to the University because we are a community committed to reason and rational discourse. Free interchange of ideas is vital for our primary function of discovering and disseminating ideas through research, teaching, and learning."

Naturally, since we are professors, we plan to sponsor workshops, lectures, and courses on the topic of academic freedom. We also intend to inform new faculty about Harvard's commitments to free speech and the resources available to them when it is threatened. We will encourage the adoption and enforcement of policies that protect academic freedom. When an individual is threatened or slandered for a scholarly opinion, which can be emotionally devastating, we will lend our personal and professional support. When activists are shouting into an administrator's ear, we will speak calmly but vigorously into the other one, which will require them to take the reasoned rather

than the easy way out. And we will support parallel efforts led by undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral students.

Harvard is just one university, but it is the nation's oldest and most famous, and for better or worse, the outside world takes note of what happens here. We hope the effects will spread outside our formerly ivy-covered walls and encourage faculty and students elsewhere to rise up. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, and if we don't defend academic freedom, we should not be surprised when politicians try to do it for us or a disgusted citizenry writes us off.

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