

The Harvard Crimson

More than 70 Harvard Faculty Form Council on Academic Freedom, Co-Led by Steven Pinker



Psychology professor Steven A. Pinker is co-leading the new Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard. By Josie W. Chen

By Rahem D. Hamid and Elias J. Schisgall, Crimson Staff Writers
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A group of more than 70 Harvard professors co-led by Psychology professor Steven A. Pinker has formed the Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard — an initiative to promote ideals of free speech and inquiry.

The council was announced in a Wednesday op-ed in the Boston Globe by Harvard Medical School professor Bertha K. Madras and Pinker, known for his controversial view that educational institutions have prioritized progressive ideals over free speech.

Pinker and Madras wrote that the group “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,” they wrote. “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.”

The council’s six co-presidents are former Harvard Medical School Dean and professor Jeffrey S. Flier; Philosophy professor Edward J. “Ned” Hall; Harvard Law School professor Jeannie Suk Gersen; former Harvard College Dean and Computer Science professor Harry R. Lewis ’68; History professor Jane Kamensky; and Pinker. Flynn J. Cratty, a lecturer in History, is the council’s executive director.

The group first formally convened at a March 22 meeting, where they selected the co-presidents, according to Cratty.

The Council’s membership includes professors from across the University, including Economics and Harvard Kennedy School professor and former chair of the Council of Economic Advisors Jason Furman ’92, former University President Lawrence H. Summers, and Economics professor N. Gregory Mankiw.

Three University Professors — Harvard’s highest ranking professors — are members: Summers, Eric S. Maskin ’72, and Gary King.

Its membership also includes some professors who have been involved in high-profile controversies, including Law School professors Ronald S. Sullivan Jr., who sparked outrage in 2019 after deciding to represent disgraced Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein in court; J. Mark Ramseyer, who published a controversial 2021 paper arguing “comfort women” forced into sex slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army during

World War II were actually contracted sex workers; and Janet E. Halley, who represents embattled professor John L. Comaroff.

In a Wednesday interview, Summers said “making sure that there are no unacceptable subjects on university campuses, and promoting viewpoint diversity is profoundly important.”

“There are very serious issues of viewpoint diversity, and unacceptable subjects for dialogue and pressures for conformity at Harvard, as there are other universities,” he added.



Former University President Lawrence H. Summers, pictured at a 2022 IOP Forum, is a member of the Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard. By Julian J. Giordano

Despite the reputation of academic freedom as an issue mainly touted by conservatives, Lewis said that he did not consider the organization to be driven by a political agenda.

Government professor and CAFH member Ryan D. Enos concurred, saying academic freedom can be threatened “from both sides of the aisle.”

“At certain times, we might find that our own ideologies are the ones that are in the minority or the ones that are out of power and maybe under attack, and that limits our ability to do our jobs and to do the research we’re supposed to do,” Enos said.

But HLS professor Nikolas E. Bowie, who is not on the Council, viewed it with skepticism, writing in an email that the “actual threats to academic freedom” were Harvard’s resistance to students, faculty, and staff labor organizing efforts.

“I’m looking forward to seeing this council of tenured professors use their power against exploitation on campus,” Bowie wrote. “But I won’t hold my breath.”

University spokesperson Jonathan L. Swain declined to comment.

In an emailed statement, Cratty said critical discussion about the best ways to promote academic freedom was in the spirit of the Council’s mission. Some faculty who are not on the Council, like Harvard Divinity School professor Janet Gyatso, agree that academic freedom is at risk.

“There is a great temptation on the part of politicians, especially ambitious ones, and businessmen, especially greedy ones, to try to control information and the production of knowledge,” Gyatso wrote in an emailed statement.

“But as scholars we need to be able to utter and analyze everything, including uncomfortable histories, in order to get at the truth,” she added.

For Lewis, the former dean of the College, academic freedom is tied intrinsically to Harvard’s mission.

“I love Harvard, I think it’s the greatest university in the world, and I want it to stay that way,” he said. “And the only way it’s gonna stay that way is if it’s a welcome place for people to voice unpopular opinions and to be oddballs in various ways and countercultural in various ways.”

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