

Harvard Has a Free Speech Moment

Fifty professors form an alliance on academic freedom.

By The Wall Street Journal Editorial Board

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The Harvard University campus in Cambridge, Mass.
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Conservatives are so few at American universities that the battle to restore respect for free and open debate will have to be led by what used to be known as traditional liberals. Well, maybe there's hope. On Wednesday Harvard University said it's forming a new faculty-led Council on Academic Freedom dedicated to the free exchange of ideas as a cornerstone of "reason and rational discourse."

In an op-ed for the Boston Globe, Harvard professors Steven Pinker and Bertha Madras write that “an academic establishment that stifles debate betrays the privileges that the nation grants it.” Free speech, they write, is also essential to human progress. Intellectual orthodoxy “is bound to provide erroneous guidance on vital issues like pandemics, violence, gender, and inequality.”

The professors note that although they are comfortable with expressing controversial or unorthodox views, others on campus are not. Tenure no doubt helps. But the diversity, equity and inclusion bureaucracy is powerful at Harvard and the school ranks 170 out of 203 in the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression’s free speech list. Mr. Pinker and Ms. Madras acknowledge the school has had “cases of disinvitation, sanctioning, harassment, public shaming, and threats of firing and boycotts for the expression of disfavored opinions.”

The academic freedom group includes former Harvard president and Treasury Secretary Larry Summers, former dean of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine Jeffrey Flier, law professor Jeannie Suk Gersen, economist Gregory Mankiw, social ethics professor Mahzarin R. Banaji and Islamic intellectual history professor Khaled El-Rouayheb, among others across the ideological spectrum.

This is progress, but the message will have to spread across the school’s administration and especially the student body. Students at many colleges these days operate like Red Guards in China’s Cultural Revolution. Being unwoke is socially punished. Breaking that culture of conformity will take reinforcement across the institution.

There's ample reason to be skeptical, and we'll believe it when we see it. But if Harvard's faculty is recommitting the school to the bedrock principles of university life, hear, hear.