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OPINION

To restore Harvard's reputation, faculty should speak up

In countries like China and Russia, one is punished if they present an idea that is classified as anti-patriotic. Is this truly the direction that Harvard should now be turning?

By John Evangelakos, Jason H.P. Kravitt, and William Schmalzl
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The recent [Harvard Crimson op-ed by professor and dean of social science Lawrence D. Bobo](#) calling for sanctions against faculty members who criticize Harvard University leadership with the intent to arouse the intervention of “external actors” into university business was stunning.

The piece [sparked another controversy, and backlash](#), that Harvard may deserve but doesn't need, given the parade of headlines that have left its formerly stellar reputation in shreds. It was also an insult to alumni, like us, who care about the school,

don't see ourselves as "external actors," and have a legitimate stake in the debate about how to get Harvard back on track.

When we attended Harvard, we learned that our thinking improved through critical analysis and debate. Criticism exposed the flaws and weaknesses in our arguments and forced us to better present and support our ideas or to change them in the face of compelling evidence that they were not altogether correct. We were taught not what to think but how to think. Open and free debate was the path to arriving at the best answer, particularly debating the arguments that we found most disagreeable.

What Bobo proposes is that faculty speak only to other faculty, students, and Harvard administrators; no one else needs to be involved in discussing what's going on at Harvard. The university has many constituencies beyond faculty, students, and administrators, however. There are thousands of alumni for example. Harvard is also a renowned international institution that serves as the base for many who engage in public debates around the world. And Harvard is the recipient of millions of dollars of government support — [\\$676 million](#) in fiscal 2023 alone.

In countries like China and Russia, one is punished if they present an idea that is classified as anti-patriotic or that is deemed to promote a foreign ideology. Is this truly the direction that Harvard should now be turning?

Bobo's call for punishing heretics is difficult to understand in light of surveys that year after year demonstrate that self-censorship, by students and faculty, is a significant issue at Harvard and [other schools](#). The degree to which students and faculty [withhold their views](#) diminishes materially the intellectual experience that many come to Harvard to realize and detracts from the public debate on

how to improve the university. It is also difficult to reconcile Bobo's proposal with steps that have been taken in the past year to foster more open dialogue at Harvard and to create a culture of civility and tolerance.

As for the external actors that Bobo is concerned about, he identifies them as including alumni, donors, federal agencies, and the government.

I don't know if Bobo intended it this way, but it's difficult to accept his assertion as anything less than an insult to the thousands of alumni who care deeply about Harvard and its mission and who donate their time and money generously to support the university.

As for the government, it provides millions of dollars each year to support university operations and provide financial aid to many students. The government is also responsible for ensuring that Harvard complies with its legal obligations. Notable examples include Title VI of the Civil Rights Act that prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin and Title IX of the same act that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. The government often rewards and the media frequently heralds whistleblowers who speak out about wrongdoing. Bobo seems to prefer to retaliate.

Our own personal views are that universities should provide their faculty and students considerable latitude to speak, so we believe Bobo should be free to express his personal views however misguided we regard them to be.

This latitude to express personal views, however, must be evaluated more broadly when the speaker also serves as an

administrator who controls the careers of faculty, a considerable budget, and the ability to influence curriculum. When an administrator such as Bobo wields such power while advocating for curtailing one of the most fundamental aspects of academic freedom and free speech, members of the Harvard community must know that he is exercising his authority to promote the highest principles and best interests of the university first and foremost and not personal views that are anathema to those fundamental freedoms.

Interim president Alan Garber, interim provost John Manning, the Harvard Corporation, and the Harvard Board of Overseers should all speak publicly to the issue that Bobo has raised. Is Harvard moving forward toward open dialogue and greater academic freedom or will it cling to the strand of illiberalism that has stained the university in recent years?

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