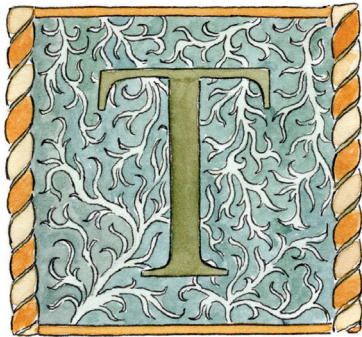


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Editor's Note

When did the academy become illiberal?



ORPOR, TURPITUDE, tendentiousness: Higher education has been charged with many sins over many years.

In the 1770s, Adam Smith took aim at Oxford, where “the greater part of the publick professors have, for these many years, given up altogether even the pretence of teaching.” In the 1950s, William F. Buckley Jr. made his name by denouncing Yale, his alma mater, for propagating atheism and collectivism. In the 1980s, Allan Bloom, a philosophy professor at the University of Chicago, became a household name for decrying the way in which academic fads had contributed to “the closing of the American mind.”

Universities have survived these periodic controversies and crises of trust because the public appetite for what they offered far outstripped the distrust and resentments they also generated. And what they offered was a lot: intellectual excellence; professional cre-

dentialization; social mobility; the creation, advancement, and dissemination of advanced and specialized knowledge; independence from external and internal political pressures; idyllic communities.



Visit most any university or college campus today, and the vision of the idyllic community—the stately buildings, well-tended lawns, state-of-the-art athletic facilities, and lively local hangouts—survives. So do broad fields of genuine excellence, particularly in STEM fields such as biomedical research, astrophysics, and computer science. And universities still play a vital role as educators of future doctors, attorneys, nurses, engineers, and other essential professions.

But the broader argument for universities has become harder to make in recent years. Social mobility? A tough nut to swallow for parents who pay exorbitant tuitions, or for students faced with decades of paying off their loans, or for graduates reckoning with the ever-diminishing prestige and purchasing power of most degrees. Intellectual seriousness? Not at universities where grade inflation is rampant, aggressive ideologues (including tenured professors, adjunct lecturers, and graduate students) teach undergraduates, students are afraid to speak their minds, and social life is, by turns, frivolous, libertine, and censorious. Political independence? Administrators have been required to enforce legally dubious “Dear Colleague” letters from the U.S. Department of Education. University presidents live in fear of being called to testify before Congress, and nonprogressive university faculty (usually moderate Democrats) must bite their tongues lest they fall afoul of prevailing campus orthodoxies.

And then there’s antisemitism. For years, a handful of worried observers had warned, in newspaper op-eds, magazine

essays (including in *SAPIR*), and documentaries such as *Columbia Unbecoming* that campus life was increasingly hostile to Jewish students, at least those who didn't publicly abjure Zionism. Those activists were treated as semi-hysterics. Then came October 7, and the moral and intellectual rot that it exposed on one campus after another, particularly at the universities that were thought of as elite.

How did universities fall off their pedestals? Many reasons, but one is central: the turn away from liberalism as the dominant mindset of the academy.

By *liberalism* I do not mean the word in the usual ideological or political sense. I mean it as the habit of open-mindedness, a passion for truth, a disdain for dogma, an aloofness from politics, a fondness for skeptics and gadflies and iconoclasts, a belief in the importance of evidence, logic, and reason, a love of argument rooted in intelligent difference. Above all, a curious, probing, independent spirit. These were the virtues that great universities were supposed to prize, cultivate, and pass along to the students who went through them. It was the experience I had as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago 30-plus years ago, and that older readers probably recall of their own college experience in earlier decades.

Except in a few surviving corners, that kind of university is fading, if not altogether gone. In its place is the model of the university as an agent of social change and ostensible betterment. It is the university that encourages students to dwell heavily on their experience of victimization, or their legacy as victimizers, rather than as accountable individuals responsible for their own fate. It is the university that carefully arranges the racial and ethnic composition of its student body in the hopes of shaping a different kind of future elite. It is the university that tries to stamp out ideas or inquiries it considers socially dangerous or morally pernicious, irrespective of considerations of truth. It is the university that ceaselessly valorizes identity,

not least when it comes to who does, or doesn't, get to make certain arguments. It is the university that substitutes the classics of philosophy and literature with mandatory reading lists that skew heavily to the contemporary ideological left. It is the university that makes official statements on some current events (but not on others), or tips its hand by prominently affiliating itself with political activism in scholarly garb. It is the university that attempts to rewrite the English language in search of more "inclusive" vocabulary. It is the university that silently selects an ideologically homogeneous faculty, administration, and graduate-student body. It is the university that finds opportunistic ways to penalize or get rid of professors whose views it dislikes. It is the university that has allowed entire fields of inquiry—gender studies, ethnic studies, critical studies, Middle Eastern studies—to become thoroughly dogmatic and politicized.

A charitable term for this kind of institution might be *the relevant university*—relevant in the sense of playing a direct role in shaping public and political life. In fact, there are many less political and more productive ways in which universities can credibly establish their relevance to the world around them: by serving as centers for impartial expertise, making pathbreaking discoveries, and educating students with vital skills, not just academically but also with the skills of good citizenship and leadership.

But the latter kind of relevance does not emerge from a deliberate quest for relevance—that is, for being in tune with contemporary fads or beliefs. It emerges from a quest for excellence. And excellence is cultivated, in large part, by a conscious turning away from trying to be relevant, focusing instead on pursuing knowledge for its own sake; upholding high and consistent standards; protecting the integrity of a process irrespective of the result; maintaining a powerful indifference both to the weight of tradition and the pressure exerted by contemporary beliefs. In short, excellence is achieved by dedicating oneself to

the ideals and practices of the kind of liberalism that gives free rein to what the educator Abraham Flexner, in the 1930s, called “the roaming and capricious possibilities of the human spirit.”

What does excellence achieve, beyond being a good in itself? Public trust. Ordinary people do not need to have a good understanding of, say, virology to trust that universities are doing a good job of it, especially if advances in the field lead to medicines in the cabinet. Nor does the public need to know the exact formulas by which universities choose their freshman class, so long as they have reason to believe that Yale, Harvard, Princeton and their peers admit only the most brilliant and promising.

But trust is squandered when the public learns that at least some virologists have used their academic authority to make deceitful claims about the likely origins of the Covid-19 pandemic. Trust evaporates when the public learns how the admissions process was being gamed for the sake of achieving race-conscious outcomes that disregard considerations of academic merit, to the striking disadvantage of certain groups. And trust is destroyed when the country sees students from elite universities behaving like Maoist cadres — seizing university property, disrupting campus life, and chanting thought-terminating slogans such as “From the river to the sea.” What those protests have mainly achieved, other than to demoralize or terrify Jewish students, is to advertise the moral bankruptcy and intellectual collapse of our “relevant” universities. Illiberalism always ends up finding its way to antisemitism.



There’s a straightforward way out of this mess. It’s a return to the values of the liberal university.

Already, there are academic leaders willing to go there. In his

impressive inaugural speech, Jonathan Levin, Stanford's new president, put the point clearly: "The university's purpose is not political action or social justice," he said. "It is to create an environment in which learning thrives." Sian Leah Beilock, the president of Dartmouth, has been equally clear: "Universities must be places where different ideas and opinions lead to personal growth, scientific breakthroughs, and new knowledge," she recently wrote in *The Atlantic*. "But when a group of students takes over a building or establishes an encampment on shared campus grounds and declares that this shared educational space belongs to only one ideological view, the power and potential of the university die." Daniel Diermeier, the chancellor of Vanderbilt, makes much the same point in this issue of SAPIR.

But even if the way out is clear, the obstacles in the way are large. Among them:

- Illiberal faculty, who see political activism as central to their moral and professional duties.
- Indifferent faculty, who may not share the ideological inclinations of their illiberal colleagues but aren't about to speak out for the values of a liberal university.
- Social hostility toward faculty whose research or conclusions are viewed as ideologically suspect.
- A deeply entrenched DEI bureaucracy that seeks to categorize and divide the student body into racial and ethnic groups.
- Students, many from comfortable backgrounds, who have been taught to identify themselves as victims, or as "allies" of victims.
- A political environment that drives conservative-leaning undergraduates from pursuing academic careers.

- A selective adherence to free expression, which demands free speech for some points of view but silence from others.
- A tenure system that is supposed to guarantee academic freedom but often helps entrench an illiberal and self-dealing faculty.

What will turn the system around? Leadership is essential, starting with boards of trustees who must refuse to serve as mere cheerleaders or rubber stamps for university administrators drawn from the usual academic ranks and in tune with their ways of thinking and acting. It's also essential to change the value system on campus, not only by moving away from identity politics but also by finding ways to rekindle the dying art of disagreement. The weight of public disenchantment with higher education (not least in the form of declining enrollments) also needs to be felt on campus, to create a sense of institutional urgency about the need for change. Competition helps, too, especially in the form of new models for post-high-school education, such as corporate apprenticeships.

We have returned to the subject of education, which was the focus of our sixth volume from the summer of 2022, because the aftermath of October 7 has reminded us of how much a thriving Jewish future depends on reforming our universities. With this volume, we hope to stir conversation, ideas, and passion in the service of rescuing these broken, but still necessary, institutions. *

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