



Universities Must Reject Creeping Politicization

Now is the time to return to core principles.

THE REVIEW | OPINION

By *Daniel Diermeier* and *Andrew D. Martin* February 18, 2025

American research universities are at a crossroads. The creeping politicization of our campuses has become a crisis we cannot ignore.

In a polarized era in which every American institution has become a political Rorschach test, the Israel-Gaza conflict, in particular, has divided college campuses and public opinion to a degree unseen since the 1960s. Universities are now in the crosshairs of government and activists alike.

Some universities have exacerbated the situation by drifting from their core purposes of education and research to take official positions on political and social issues. This has led many to see universities as just another ideological combatant in the daily political struggle. Public confidence in American higher education has reached [an all-time low](#).

This is dangerous. American research universities are vital to the nation's economy, security, and democratic systems. Their capacity for research and innovation is unmatched. They offer students a proven path to higher wages and career advancement. If they are properly focused on their core purpose, universities are an essential training ground for civic life in a pluralistic society. At a time when everything is contested, universities insist on reason, evidence, and truth.

With so much at stake, universities must return to their foundational purpose and recommit to the core principles that sustain them.

As the heads of two of America's preeminent research institutions, we call on our fellow leaders in higher education to do just that. The boards of our universities have recently committed to a "Statement of Principles" articulating our bedrock commitment to three essential, time-tested tenets our institutions have long embraced and that can be a bulwark against politicization. We urge other universities to adopt them as well.

The first principle is excellence. We must be committed to it above all else, in every aspect of our work, free of political criteria. This includes how we admit students, how we hire and promote faculty and staff, how we allocate resources, and how we recognize members of our community. Some universities, perhaps influenced by pressure to rise in national rankings or a desire to gain political favor, have allowed excellence to become compromised. But by muddling its focus on excellence, a university hampers its ability to provide life-changing learning, make pathbreaking discoveries, bring innovation to Main Street and medicine, enhance economic opportunity, and strengthen our national security.

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To reaffirm this core principle, universities must select students, faculty, and staff with the highest potential, without regard to any political litmus tests. To ensure we are finding this high-potential talent and that they are finding us, recruiting efforts should be broad and far-reaching. We must make sure that highly qualified candidates beyond the tried-and-true wells of talent know about our institutions, believe they can be part of them, and are thoroughly supported once they're here. To this end, universities can work more closely with nonprofits and community-based organizations to reach rural students, urban students, veterans, and others. Vanderbilt and WashU's work with [The STARS College Network](#), which provides college pathways for rural students, is an example of how these partnerships can work.

The second principle is a commitment to both academic freedom and free expression. Intolerance has gripped too many campuses. Recommitting to academic freedom and free expression means fostering a culture of unfettered inquiry and discovery for faculty as well as for students. It means encouraging a broad range of views related to all aspects of the human experience — political, economic, social, religious, and so on. And it means providing ample opportunities for debate and dissent without censorship or retribution characterized by a respect for the perspectives of others.

The protests that roiled America's campuses last spring showed us how sorely universities need a return to a culture of civil discourse. And universities that have not yet done so must return to the practice of institutional neutrality, whereby the institution and its leaders refrain from taking positions, in word or deed, on political and social matters not directly connected to the university's core function.

To reaffirm the core principle of free expression and academic freedom, universities should review and consider amendments to their bylaws, student handbooks, faculty manuals, and community creeds. Programming is critical to establishing a robust culture of civil debate. Vanderbilt, for instance, offers talks, debates, trainings, fellowships, and an annual free-speech summit through a program called [Dialogue Vanderbilt](#); WashU offers courses,

programs, and workshops to prepare students for an increasingly complex society through its [Dialogue Across Difference](#) program.

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A culture of civil discourse is essential, but we also need rules. And those rules must be enforced. Clear policies governing expression, protest, and dissent that include appropriate limitations on time, place, and manner are necessary to provide maximum freedom of expression without trampling on the rights of fellow classmates and faculty or obstructing the core operations that support the teaching and research mission of these institutions.

The third principle is accessibility. We must continue working to minimize the barriers, financial and otherwise, that impede students' access to our institutions or that hinder their academic success, pursuit of excellence, and personal growth. We cannot price out the very students who will help us to achieve our goal of cultivating a robust and varied community of independent thinkers. This means redoubling financial aid, recruiting, and student-support efforts to make it possible for qualified students from any background to live, learn, and thrive on our campuses.

These three principles are not new. They have defined America's great research universities for decades. But too many universities have lost sight of them. We must vigorously commit to them once again.

The potential cost of not doing so is too high. Despite their recent challenges, America's research universities remain the envy of the world. They must not lose their way.

Universities contribute to the betterment of society not by pursuing ideological agendas but through the research and innovation of their faculty and students, by producing knowledgeable leaders, and by serving as a model for civil discourse grounded in critical reasoning. The universities we oversee have drawn a line against politicization so that we can continue contributing to the nation's competitiveness and strength abroad, and to stability and prosperity here at home. All American research universities should do the same.

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