

Higher education under attack

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President Donald Trump has declared war on America's colleges and universities, demanding they bow to his demands on what they can teach and whom they can admit or hire. Trump's illegal and autocratic actions are tantamount to a war on knowledge intended to force schools to bend the knee to his ideology and chill free speech and academic pursuit.

Trump says much of his attack on higher education is in response to antisemitism on campuses. Without a doubt, there was antisemitism before the heinous actions by Hamas on Oct. 7 and the ensuing war, and it has grown since. We need to address antisemitism on campus and ensure Jewish students, and all students, feel safe. But Trump is weaponizing antisemitism investigations to attack disfavored speech and stoke culture wars, distrust and division, and to undermine higher education as a bulwark of democracy and an engine of our economy. It's wrong, antidemocratic and unconstitutional. The administration is using Jews as an excuse to disappear students who are here legally, with immigration officials arresting and attempting to deport students who have committed no crimes—without due process, a linchpin of American democracy.

This may help Trump's aim to divide Americans, but it won't make campuses safer for Jewish students or answer the real issues around antisemitism. That's one reason that a coalition of Jewish organizations released a statement saying that Trump's actions make Jewish students and the Jewish community less safe.

Trump has launched investigations into dozens of colleges and universities and stripped billions in research grants from schools. The administration has issued demands ranging from direct government oversight of academic programs—or in the case of Columbia University, oversight of the whole institution—to dictating disciplinary policies and controlling hiring decisions. It is targeting students for exercising their First Amendment rights, and revoking visas for faculty and staff. The administration's intent is to remake America's higher education system in its image through blunt force.

The freedom to pursue knowledge, the freedom of expression and the freedom of speech are fundamental American rights that are foundational to a functioning democracy. America's public schools, colleges

and universities cultivate the exploration of knowledge and free expression and empower students to become engaged citizens. One of their hallmarks is that they are a marketplace of ideas where free and open discussion and disagreement is encouraged. That is enabled by ensuring our education institutions are independent from government control or coercion. When a government asserts control over what can be taught, thought or said, democracy itself is at risk.

The free pursuit of knowledge empowers Americans.

Stripping research and innovation funding to force compliance will hurt America's competitiveness and help our adversaries outpace us in technological and other advancements. America's university research and innovation centers have long been the envy of the world. The federal government, through federal agencies and grants, is a fundamental powerhouse and supporter of health, scientific, technology and other research. The U.S. is the world leader in this research—research that the private sector cannot and will not do on its own and that leads to discoveries, innovations, cures and advances that benefit the common good and move our society forward. Colleges and universities are also anchors of their

local communities, supporting local jobs and small businesses, providing community gathering spaces, and growing industries tied to university research and innovation.

This war on knowledge and expression must be opposed in the courts, on the streets, and by our colleges and universities.

As the largest union of higher education staff and faculty, the AFT joined our affiliate, the American Association of University Professors, to sue the Trump administration on behalf of our members for unlawfully cutting millions in federal funding for public health research at Columbia.

Last week, Harvard University boldly rejected Trump's unlawful and unprecedented demands for government control over it. Harvard's president wrote that "no government ... should dictate what private universities can teach, whom they can admit and hire, and which areas of study and inquiry they can pursue."

Americans have also taken to the streets to oppose this war on knowledge and freedoms. The attacks on higher education were a major focus of the April 5 Hands Off actions that mobilized tens of thousands of Americans across the country to reject Trump's chaotic and cruel agenda.

The free pursuit and availability of knowledge empowers Americans, strengthens our economy and democracy, and is foundational for opportunity. That's why we all must take a stand against this war on knowledge.



Weingarten announcing a lawsuit to stop the federal funding cuts at Columbia University.

Photo: AFT

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