

Escape from Academic Freedom

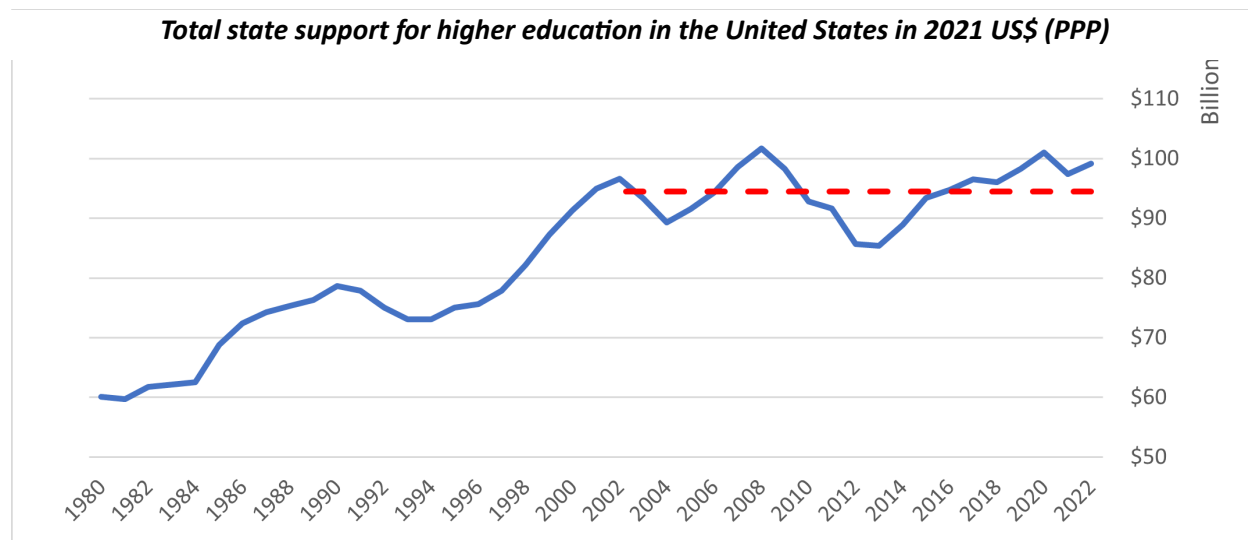
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Abstract

The university, an institution dating back to at least the eleventh century, was conceived as a community of scholars and learners. But does the contemporary abandonment of truth pursuits constitute an escape from our traditional responsibilities? As Erich Fromm put it, "It happens that some interests are furthered by finding the truth, others by destroying it." Academia has undergone a restructuring, actively displacing truth-tellers in favor of market interests. The search for truth will remain a focus of colleges and universities to the extent that individual faculty and students defy functionaries to tell it.

Does the abandonment of truth pursuits constitute an escape from our traditional responsibilities? It is now plain to see that technology companies have suppressed truths running counter to political interests. But the influence of publishing houses and funding agencies may be having a similar effect in academia. The political consequences of research findings play a role in the assessment of the quality and significance of research. As Erich Fromm (1941, 55) wrote eighty years ago, "It happens that some interests are furthered by finding the truth, others by destroying it."

Which interests are furthered by the suppression of truth? Prefiguring the instrumentalism that technocratic management implies, John Rickert (1986) notes that reason, for Fromm, is "an instrument of truth and demystification that seeks to apprehend the world as it is rather than manipulate it for instrumental ends." Market forces have transformed the university from a community of scholars into a work center of academic contractors. Most faculty in the United States work on a contingent basis and without the protections of a generation ago (Atkins et al. 2018; Mason and Megoran 2021; Benjamin 2010). The figure below depicts inflation-adjusted data from the *Grapevine Report on State Fiscal Support for Higher Education* showing average state support reaching \$96.6 billion in 2002. It has remained below this level ever since. Average annual state support between 2002 and 2022 is below \$94.5 billion.



Notes: PPP = purchasing power parity. Solid line indicates total state support in the indicated year. Dashed line indicates average total state support between 2002 and 2022. Data adjusted for inflation in 2021 US\$ (PPP) by the author.

Source: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association 2022.

As universities begin to resemble corporations, they also lose the imperative to seek the truth. It isn't that truth and capital are incompatible. Truth is simply ignored, orthogonal to the profit motive. The suppression of unprofitable information and the promotion of outright falsehoods has been common practice in the private sector in recent decades. This has led to account fraud at Wells Fargo (Financial Services Committee 2016) and an opioid epidemic resulting from Purdue Pharma's aggressive marketing of OxyContin to doctors (States News Service 2016). Wells Fargo's widespread fraud harmed 3.5 million people (McGrath 2017), while opioids have killed over half a million (*Lancet* 2021). Pfizer paid \$2.3 billion to the Justice Department in 2009 for bribing doctors to prescribe fraudulently marketed drugs (Department of Justice 2009). In government, the indiscriminate monitoring of US citizens and other abuses at the National Security Agency only came to be revealed through whistleblowers Edward Snowden, Julian Assange, and Chelsea Manning (Maniquet 2016).

Faculty feel the economic influence in the funding priorities of major granting agencies, themselves funded by large corporations and overseen by a similarly influenced board of directors. Federal grants set the research agenda, making up the majority of funding available for researchers since the mid-1940s (Wu 2020). But the percentage of National Science Foundation (2011) research and development expenditures going to fields of study outside science and engineering hovers around 4 percent.

Rather than truth, more often what we observe is rhetoric. In Socrates's dialogue with Gorgias, Plato paints a stark contrast between truth and rhetoric. Exasperated by Socrates's insistence on

the truth, Gorgias offers a cogent defense of rhetoric. Persuasive argumentation, independent of the veracity of the words it contains, has the ability to bend others to one's will. Gorgias beseeches the gadfly, "With this ability you'll have the doctor for your slave . . . if you've got the ability to speak and to persuade the crowds," (Plato [370 BC] 2015, 798) among other manipulations.

Such naked politicking is often justified by arguing that individuals need to be "nudged" into behavior that benefits themselves and humankind (Sunstein and Reisch 2017). When the vision of university leaders differs from that of leading faculty, decisions are often to the detriment of research. Galileo died under house arrest, and his discussion of Copernicus's heliocentric theory of the galaxy got both of their works banned. British and US physicists rejected Einstein's theory of relativity because it implied the rejection of dominant theories about the universe being filled with ether (Goldberg 1970).

Such historical suppression at academic institutions is not specific to Catholic inquisition or imperial pride. Universities run on tuition, and academics have long depended on financial benefactors. The first "universities" as such emerged in Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Salamanca, setting the institutional model for those that followed. *Studium generale*, as the early universities were referred to, were places where many professors gathered for scholarship and invited students from all Europe to study under them. These early professors somewhat overlapped with monks and friars, some of whom had long been consuming and manipulating text in their cloisters by candlelight. The pope and Holy Roman emperor granted these institutions several benefits through charters, including relative autonomy and economic resources. So long as they abstained from heresy, universities were free to develop as they saw fit in the pursuit of "truth." Augustine (1847) had written one millennium earlier that "what is against truth cannot be just. Now who can doubt that every lie is against truth? Therefore there can be no just lie. Again, what man does not see clearly that every thing which is just is of the truth?"

But economic interests had also always been present. Universities ran on tuition, and students left institutions if they were not satisfied. Such is the story of the founding of Cambridge, begun by town-gown relations gone awry at Oxford. John Henry Cardinal Newman (1902) argued that universities should be a place for both free thought and moral authority. Himself an Anglican-turned-Catholic, Newman (1864) spent his life trying to mend the rift the Reformation had perpetrated. But there would be little conciliarism in this regard. Theology has been booted from most universities as a field of study.

In both the academic and religious sense, most professors were Masters. Academic research as such was later refined and crystalized into the doctoral degree in Germany after the Thirty Years' War. Secularization led to increased state control of universities in Europe, since these universities now depended on the state for financing. Theology faculties began to evaporate as Enlightenment thinkers placed secular reason and the scientific method at the center of *studium* practice. Free thought and moral authority remained at odds through the modern period.

One enduring aspect of university life was that both secular and religious institutions attracted the children of the elite. Many faculty at private institutions have the experience of continuing to teach this population. But faculty at land-grant universities now also educate large numbers of the working-class, first-generation college students, immigrants, and veterans in significant numbers. The role of the academy, operating in loco parentis to the children of the elite, broadened over the last century to include the general public.

It was the generation of baby boomer students at Berkeley that would break speech codes and make a place for truth at the university. The Berkeley free speech movement insisted on a broad range of public expression (Cohen 2009). This student rebellion created the template used by contemporary campus social movements. In France, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus would support similar student movements. The protests in Paris led to the closure of the University of Paris and its dissolution into more than a dozen different institutions.

After the end of Soviet communism, the university responded to the economic demands of globalization. Major universities have become global, establishing branches in major cities around the world. Yale, New York University, Temple, and Georgetown now have campuses in Singapore, Shanghai, Tokyo, and Qatar, respectively (Cross-Border Education Research Team 2020). This development raises questions about the freedom of speech faculty and students have in countries that do not otherwise protect these rights (Sleeper 2015).

The establishment of foreign branches may be a logical extension of the expansion of access to higher education taking place in the twentieth century. Land-grant institutions in the United States expanded access to higher education, with women and minority groups attending in higher numbers ever since. Tolerance and acceptance of varying identities became an ethical imperative leading to broad gains in these areas.

Unfortunately, some activists have corrupted the noble ambitions of inclusion and acceptance and now insist on the tolerance and acceptance of feelings and opinions. This development leads us in a different direction and is even opposed to the initial goal of inclusion by conflating identity and emotion. Challenges to identity politics are important because identity politics reduce our experiences to narrow material interests (Pratten 2012).

Emerson College, for example, punished students for distributing stickers with the phrase “China kinda sus,” intended to draw attention to Chinese human rights abuses (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education 2021). Critics claimed the stickers were “anti-Asian,” even though at least one of the student leaders involved were themselves Asian (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education 2022). Not to be outdone in their sanctimony, the Stanford University information technology department (2022) published a list of “harmful” words on its website that it sought to eliminate from campus documents. Some of the terms they sought to ban include *blind review*, *blacklist*, *Hispanic*, and *American*. While well intentioned, these hate speech rules are themselves exclusionary. A recent Facebook hate speech algorithm tested in 2021 found racist language more prevalent among African Americans and Latinos than among whites and flagged

“comments denigrating white people more than attacks on every other group” (Rosenberg 2021). Corporate executives and social media users have similarly opposed insightful racial commentary coming from Black comedians such as Red Foxx, Richard Pryor, Dave Chappelle, and others, while disingenuously pointing to perceived racial aesthetics.

Universities are also becoming less welcoming to working-class students. The number of Pell grant recipients peaked in 2011 and their numbers have declined each year thereafter (Ma 2021, 44). In each of the years between 1982 and 2016, the price of tuition rose faster than the rate of inflation (Bundick and Pollard 2019). These trends may lead to a decline in student enrollments.

Truth has always been subaltern to politics. Truth-tellers are banned from major social media platforms and criticized by online activists. Emotional decision-making on the part of authorities drives this polarization of the culture. Truth is still found in academia, but it is best found where it has always been best found—in the marginal students protesting the status quo. These rebellious students are more often found on the political right than they were a half-century ago (Esparza 2022). The search for truth will remain a focus of colleges and universities to the extent that individual faculty and students insist on telling it.

Faculty at the elite liberal arts institutions tend to vote Democrat by a ratio of ten-to-one (Langbert 2018; Langbert, Quain, and Klein 2016). This ratio was only half as bad at the turn of the twenty-first century (Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte 2005). With such political homogeneity in the academy, it is no wonder that the pursuit of truth has become subservient to the advancement of political agendas. Academics attempting to break ranks sometimes face career consequences. Fromm himself suffered career setbacks after breaking with Herbert Marcuse and others of the New Left. Neil McLaughlin (1998) explains, “Fromm’s attempts to escape from orthodoxy is a recipe for becoming a forgotten intellectual but paradoxically, it is also one road toward creating interesting and useful ideas.”

Truth can still be found where the subject matter happens to coincide with the prevailing winds, in scattered and obscure subject matter pursuits, or in areas having no bearing. But areas that are obscure or have no bearing are being starved of resources. This deprivation is not always malicious (though it sometimes is). Rather, universities no longer see a value in truth for truth’s sake. University administrators are too often preoccupied with maximizing full-time-equivalent students taught per dollar. For a scholar to spend the better part of an hour discussing *One Hundred Years of Solitude* under a chestnut tree becomes illogical when the mission objective is to land students a tech job.

This article has sought to illustrate how rogue individuals have been the ones to renew the university’s first principles ab initio. If this is to occur again, it will be up to faculty and students to lead the way back to truth. It is not enough to notice the fact of its politicization. One must understand how this state of affairs came to be.

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