

Do Elite Universities Really Wish to Fight the Federal Government?

By Victor Davis Hanson

Harvard has refused to accept the orders of a Trump administration commission concerning its chronic problems with anti-Semitism, campus violence, and racial tribalism, bias, and segregation.



Yet, unlike some conservative campuses that distrust an overbearing Washington, Harvard and most elite schools like it want it both ways. They do as they please on their own turf and yet still demand that the taxpayers send them multibillion-dollar checks in addition to their multibillion-dollar private incomes.

Aside from the issues of autonomy and free expression, there are lots of campus practices that higher education would prefer were not widely known to the public.

But soon they will be, and thus will become sources of public anger. Perhaps envision elite private colleges as mossy rocks, which seem outwardly picturesque—until you turn them over and see what crawls beneath.

So, if there are protracted standoffs, our elite campuses will be hard-pressed to defend the indefensible. This effort will be difficult because public confidence in higher education has already plummeted to historic lows in the most recent polls.

In Amerispeak public surveys, those expressing very little confidence or none at all in higher education have soared to about 30 percent of respondents, while those polling only "some" confidence rose to 40%.

Polls show that less than a third of Americans have quite a lot of confidence in our college campuses.

No wonder: Over the past half-century, tuition has generally risen at twice the rate of inflation. In part, that price-gouging became standard because federal aid to our most prestigious schools has skyrocketed, hand-in-glove with the federalized student loan program. It has become a \$1.7 trillion entity in which the combined rate of both those students who defaulted on their guaranteed loans or are currently late on payments is nearing 12-13 percent. In sum, colleges counted on an ensured stream of tuition money and so raised their prices inordinately, given federal guarantees.

Note that small private Hillsdale College, which takes no federal money and is the guarantor of its own generous student aid, charges about \$45,000-50,000 for combined tuition, room, and board—about half the going rate in the Ivy League and similar elite campuses.

Half the youth of the country who choose to go straight to work and not attend college might object to such use of their tax dollars. They would assume that universities with multibillion-dollar endowments and huge annual incomes have plenty of resources to guarantee their own student loans. That way, campuses would have a financial interest in seeing their own students graduate in four years, get jobs, and pay back their alma mater promptly and fully. Instead, as long as

universities are paid upfront, they seem to care little that their graduates leave heavily in debt and occasionally default on their loans.

There is almost no intellectual diversity on campus. Some recent studies have found Democrat/liberal professors outnumber their Republican/conservative counterparts by a 10-1 margin, especially in the social sciences and humanities. There are plenty of conservative PhDs on the market, but higher education has used insidious methods such as diversity oaths and covert political bias to find ways not to hire or retain them.

Colleges no longer believe in their ancient mission to teach students the ancient, disinterested, and inductive method of pursuing knowledge. Nor do they care much that their graduates leave college without a broad classical education in history, literature, language, philosophy, science, and math. Instead, they are missionaries who believe their duty is to indoctrinate youth in progressive ideology, found mostly in studies courses and deductive classes, as part of a greater project to fundamentally alter the nature of the United States.

The Supreme Court in a recent case ruled against Harvard and the University of North Carolina, stating that their use of racial and gender bias is illegal under the 14th Amendment and thus affirmative action and associated racial essentialism are forbidden.

Yet, many of our campuses simply rebrand their offices of “diversity/equity/inclusion” –the campus euphemism for using race and gender bias in applications, hiring, retention, and promotion—with newer Orwellian names like the “Office of Belonging” or “Community Outreach.” Universities are higher education’s version of sanctuary cities that likewise cavalierly believe they can largely ignore federal laws with impunity.

For example, it's illegal to segregate university events or facilities by race. But universities sidestep the law by offering race-based graduation ceremonies as "auxiliary" or "additional" events and commemorations. Racially segregated dorms are deemed "theme" houses open to all but de facto widely known as racially exclusive. If the so-called "white" minority at Stanford—some 22 percent of the student body—opted for an "extra" white graduation ceremony, theoretically open to all students, the university would—and should—shut it down promptly.

In business and private entities, "overhead deductions" or "surcharges" usually run from 10 to 20 percent. But elite private universities charge the federal government for their faculty research grants, often between 40 and 60 percent. Apparently, they operate on the principle that their supposedly prestigious brands deserve private exemption from gouging the government.

Over the past few decades, foreign governments, without audit, have poured some \$60 billion into America's purportedly most prestigious universities. Communist China and illiberal Qatar alone gave \$500 million last year. And they expect and receive something for their ideologically driven investments.

The Department of Education during the first Trump administration fined many campuses millions of dollars for not reporting these often quid pro quo gifts. If one wonders why hundreds of thousands of foreign students from dictatorial and often anti-American nations like China and Middle Eastern autocracies prove instrumental in growing anti-American and anti-Israel protests, then follow the money that funds professorships and programs sympathetic to these agendas.

The Bill of Rights and its later amendments apply to everyone everywhere in the United States. But these laws are especially operative on those entities that take federal government money and, by doing so, forfeit some of their operational autonomy.

Yet disruptions of invited lecturers who are conservative, pro-Israeli, pro-life, or who question biological males competing in female sports are commonplace on campus.

Usually, when an invited conservative federal judge, a Republican officeholder, a traditionalist activist, or a professor deemed not conservative is shouted down, or the lecture hall is swarmed with disruptive and sometimes violent student protestors, campus administrators issue pro forma stern statements about “not tolerating violations of free speech.”

And then, they do nothing.

Most campus officials either empathize with the spirit or the ideology of the disrupters. Or they are far more afraid of their own radical professors and students than they are of the federal government cutting off their funding for refusing to guarantee First Amendment protections. Harvard arguing for federal funds on the principle of protecting the First Amendment is adding insult to the serial injury it has done to free speech.

More cynically, most campus administrators assume that if conservative pro-life students ever swarmed a pro-abortion lecturer, or Jewish students ransacked a Middle East Studies classroom or chased and then trapped foreign students in a library, then they would likely be summarily expelled. Most naturally assume that universities’ selective timidity and laxity are ideologically and politically driven.

There is no guarantee of due process on campus, as understood under the Bill of Rights. Students or faculty who are accused of particular hot-button “crimes,” such as sexual harassment or “hate speech,” are often denied the right to know their accusers or to have an open hearing with legal counsel before a disinterested panel of judges.

The wronged have little redress of grievance except to use the

public court system to intervene to force the university to follow the law.

The best-kept secret of our marquee universities is a radical fall-off in standards as once defined by their own, once much ballyhooed, tough requirements. Our best universities customarily now ensure that 70-80 percent of students in their classes receive A's.

Prestigious campuses, like Harvard and Stanford, have recently introduced remedial math classes. Privately, the supposedly most demanding campuses know that their prior non-meritocratic admissions have resulted in thousands of students who enter college without the high-school preparation necessary to meet their own past traditional university requirements.

Conservative, Jewish, and religious families now doubt whether their offspring would be treated equitably or would receive a first-rate education commensurate with the four-year total \$400,000 cost, or are even now safe.

When pressed, universities usually point to their professional and graduate schools in medicine, engineering, math, science, and business as integral to American prosperity. True, they are. But to the degree they are, it is likely because they have either resisted university orthodoxy or were never as politicized as the social sciences and humanities, or are already being weaponized, albeit more slowly.

If universities were smart, they would accept federal conditions to follow the law and protect the safety and interests of their own students.

That way, they would restore their academic rigor and reputations, regain public support, and enhance meritocracy, the key to their former excellence. But even if their officials are either too partisan or timid to change, they could always publicly report to their radical faculties and students that they were "forced" to comply with conditions

that they might privately accept were certainly in their own interests.

Otherwise, at the present rate, employers, parents, and the public will make the necessary adjustments, and the brands once deemed the gold standard and prestigious will become mere dross.

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