

The American University's Path to Illiberalism



Robert Manzer writes in the [*American Enterprise Institute*](#).

Key Points

- America's universities did not slide into illiberalism overnight. The current campus phenomena we are witnessing are partly a result of a decades-long assault on the faculty's role and standing on campus.
- This assault's latest wave is being conducted in the name of equity, with the ultimate assumption that equity is fully synonymous with academic quality. Despite the falsity of this assumption, it is being pushed on universities by their accreditors.
- Congressional oversight, coupled with regulatory and potential statutory changes to the US accreditation system, can push accreditors to reverse rather than facilitate the rise of illiberalism on campus by restoring the proper balance between faculty and administrators. Similar means can be used to shift accreditors to a true quality assurance model that rewards academic excellence, superior student outcomes,

and adherence to the ideals of liberal education.

Introduction

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a wave of studies, articles, and books that were highly critical of American higher education's direction. Viewed from today, this literature is instructive as much for what is missing as for what it covers. It does not include any reference to or premonition of a range of illiberal practices that have become commonplace on today's university campuses. Historic and influential works such as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* and the National Association of Scholars' *The Dissolution of General Education 1914–1993* contain no references to speech codes, speaker and viewpoint exclusion, censorship and self-censorship, "loyalty oaths," and cancellations because these policies and practices had yet to emerge in any general way.

While speech codes began to appear at select public universities for the first time in the late 1980s, it would be another 25 years—with the infamous Yale Halloween costume incident²—before the extent of higher education's illiberal drift would be widely recognized. This 25-year period, roughly from 1990 to 2015, was a crucial one for American higher education, for it included enormous changes in the modes of instruction. These years saw the wide adoption of the nontraditional-student model and the rise and rapid expansion of online learning. Just as important was a bold and unprecedented effort by accreditors to remake colleges and universities into efficient, quality-focused, data-driven organizations through the strategic management of learning outcomes. These challenges to the status quo set the stage for the even bigger challenge of the equity movement of the mid-2010s.

The operative core of American universities is a model of

instruction and research under which professors, individually and as a whole, are remarkably independent. This independence is undergirded by an infrastructure of tenure (lifetime employment) and academic freedom (instructional autonomy), and its primacy is secured through the accreditor-endorsed requirement of “shared governance,” which demands that faculty share in governing an institution with the administration.

Faculty independence makes change difficult for universities, because higher education administrators must persuade faculty to undertake reforms. The difficulty of change is further compounded by the fact that faculty are not trained in governance but are experts in specialized disciplines. They are products of a PhD training system whose goal is to produce scholars capable of generating new discoveries and insights within tightly knit disciplinary communities characterized by peer review, exacting standards, and status hierarchies. Membership in these communities further enhances faculty independence, as faculty are answerable to not only campus authorities but also their research peers. One benefit of this dual citizenship—in the institution and the discipline—is that until recently it anchored campuses in the disciplinary cultures of free inquiry and open debate.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the American university’s path to illiberalism ran through the faculty, and more specifically, through the successive efforts by university administrators to expand the faculty’s core focus beyond its training in specialized disciplines. In this report, we review how these efforts in the name of learning-outcomes strategic management, online learning, and equity worked over decades to wear away an important bulwark against illiberalism. Responding to outside pressures of accreditors, opportunities born of a shifting educational market, and intensifying social justice campaigns, administrators took the lead in guiding their institutions through a period of turbulent change. At the end of this period, the faculty’s role on campus would be much

diminished, as would be the core values of free inquiry and open debate. Both the scope of the changes these institutions attempted and the way they implemented them would leave universities transformed.

The final section of this report will focus on reinvigorating the faculty bulwark and pushing back against illiberalism through accreditation reform. At best, higher education accreditors failed to acknowledge this illiberal drift; at worst, they abetted it. To stem and reverse this drift, accreditation must shift away from a system of federal financial aid access that contributes little to course, program, and institutional quality. Accreditation must be directed toward a true quality assurance approach that recognizes and rewards academic excellence, superior student outcomes, and adherence to the ideals of liberal education. A newly established competitive accreditation marketplace with an easier on-ramp for new accreditors creates the opportunity for such reform.

[Read the full report.](#)

Notes

1. American Association of University Professors, "1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure," <https://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/A6520A9D-0A9A-47B3-B550-C006B5B224E7/0/1915Declaration.pdf>.
2. TheAsianRepublican, "Yale Halloween Email Protest," YouTube, November 5, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiMVx2C5_Wg.