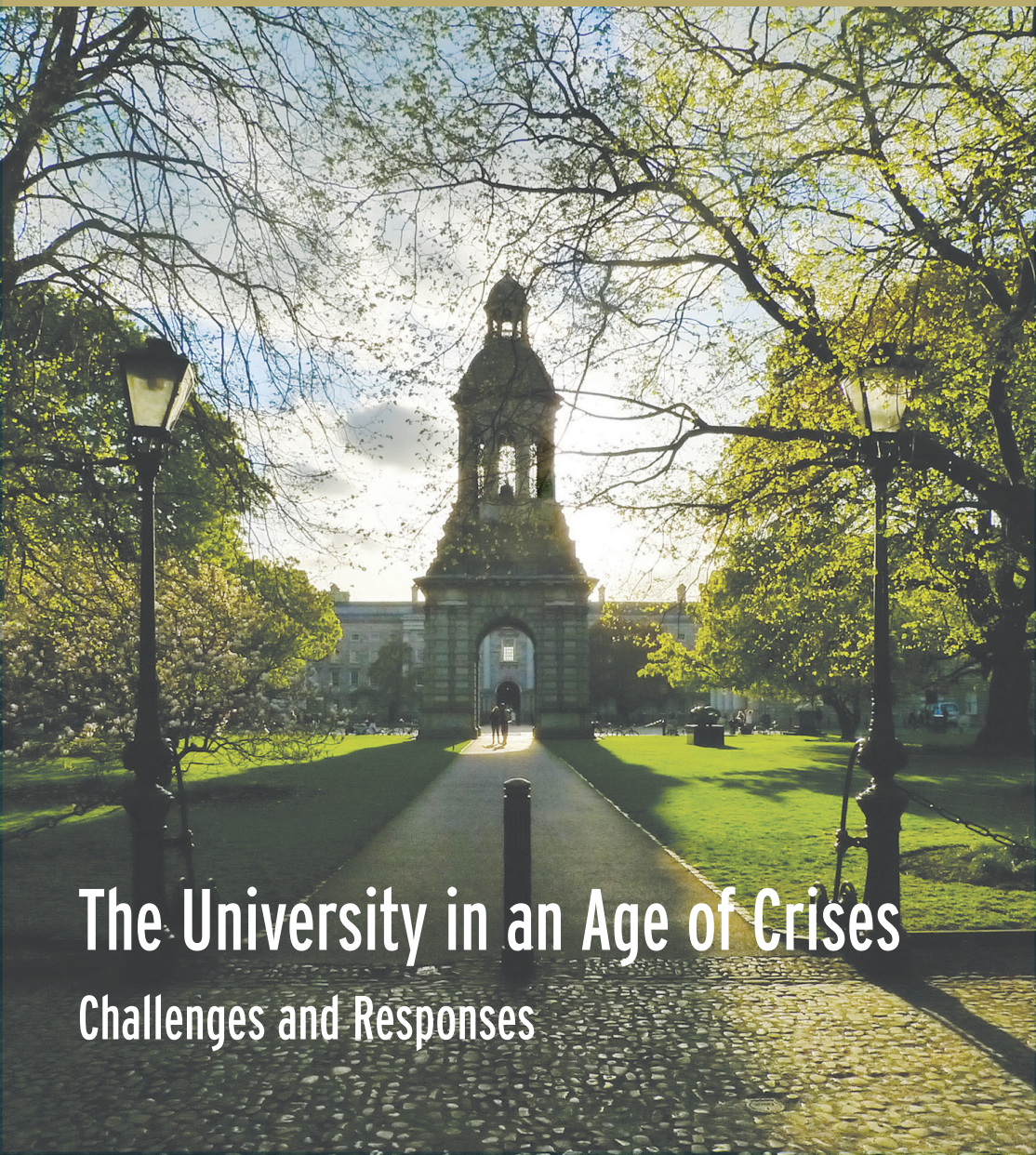


# Studies

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**The University in an Age of Crises**  
Challenges and Responses

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# Trump versus the University: Scandal or Calling to Account?

Joseph Rivera

Outside of the act of student protest, the formal political position of universities in the US typically remains underground. For as long as I can remember, the identity politics of specific parties in state or federal government has not actively affected or shaped a university's public mission or curricular priority. Harvard or Columbia or Johns Hopkins, they each managed their unique brands and educational strengths no matter who occupied the Whitehouse, a Democrat or a Republican. That long-standing tradition of autonomy for universities is no longer the case, obviously. A new era has arrived, the Trump era of interference. True to form, Trump's strategy is chaotic, inconsistent, and impulsive. Yet I propose what may seem like a straightforward assault on the independence and autonomy of universities is in reality not so clear. The political landscape makes this narrative ambiguous. Some clarity gained on this topic may be helpful because it will enable us to see what is at stake. Much of it depends on the university under investigation.

## **Out-of-control costs**

While I sympathise with university administrators and faculty who express not only frustration but dismay at the 'scandal' of the Trump administration's interference, the universities are not innocent victims. They need financial accountability. Trump threatens many wealthy universities with new taxes: I would follow through on this threat (revoking their 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status). With over 2 trillion US dollars (USD) in student debt collectively in the US (that we know of), the sheer expense of tuition has victimised ordinary families for decades – including me. I graduated from Northwestern University, an elite and expensive university in Chicago. At the time, about twenty-five years ago, the tuition eliminated my family from contention. Except for generous financial aid, which, granted, Northwestern did provide in part, I could not afford such an opportunity. Somehow, we made it work. I also found employment each summer to give my parents a minimum of \$5,000 each year toward tuition; my parents paid about \$10,000 each year. I



graduated with little debt, and my parents recovered soon after.

Fast forward to Trump's second term. Right now, Northwestern University estimates that its tuition is per annum, for the 2025–26 academic year, a staggering \$69,375. Such shock escalates: the university website also indicates that total expenses (including fees, books, housing and food, transportation expenses) can reach an estimated \$96,236.<sup>1</sup> This is the amount a student needs per year, every year for four years! This adds up in total to nearly \$400,000 for a four-year undergraduate degree.

Do not confuse my financial outrage with an attack on the educational experience I enjoyed. I loved my time there; I double majored in history and religious studies and earned a wonderful and rigorous BA degree. I grew more enthused by the topic after each lecture. I cannot remember a single boring lecture, on any topic by any professor (over the whole four years). The professors, often topflight in their discipline, never treated me with neglect but only with attentive care and concern. My four years at Northwestern consisted of the single greatest educational experience of my life. How do you put a price tag on that life-changing and rewarding experience?

By the same token, what reasonable person would spend nearly half of a million dollars on a history degree now, no matter the quality of the professors and care given to each student? University tuition costs in the US are out of control; I have studied and taught at universities in Europe for nearly twenty years. The European model does not generate large multi-billion-dollar endowment funds for their universities. True, the European model has its limitations. But European universities, in the main, do provide an excellent public good: affordable university education, which almost always leaves the student debt free.

### **Ideological and political challenge**

But this is not the issue that Trump and other government officials have with universities. I wish an administration would inquire into the inflation of tuition prices at all universities in the US. Biden sought to undo some of the debt burden by forgiving much of it, to no avail. Alas. Trump's clash differs. His originates in an ideological and political challenge (not financial) that the Republican Party generally should like to meet head on. Before Trump in January 2025 sent a letter to Johns Hopkins,<sup>2</sup> and before in March 2025 he forcefully engaged with antisemitism at Columbia University, state legislatures had been actively aiding and abetting a more conservative

curriculum in states like Florida and Ohio. For example, in 2023, during the Biden administration, the State of Ohio's senate (state legislature, not federal, so there is no confusion) passed Bill 117.

This bill requires five universities, all state funded, to open up and hire tenured faculty to serve new 'intellectual diversity' or 'viewpoint diversity' centres.<sup>3</sup> Ohio State University has already launched its Simon P. Chase Center for Civics, Culture, and Society, to be housed in its College of Public Affairs.<sup>4</sup> It aims to teach a conservative curriculum that offers a particular angle of entry into American history and values. Presumably the new curriculum will nourish Western values from the pre-Socratics up to Thomas Jefferson and John Rawls. Many democrats in the Ohio state senate 'slammed the bill' as ideological.<sup>5</sup> One state senator of Ohio, Bill DeMora, exclaimed, 'SB 117 is forcing the installation of conservative think-tanks at our public universities across the State of Ohio, and they are using taxpayer money to do it.'<sup>6</sup> Is it because universities, even large state universities in middle America like Ohio State University (known more for its football team), are susceptible to left-wing indoctrination? I doubt that very much. In point of fact, many faculty at Ohio State University worried that the Chase Center for Civics, Culture, and Society would simply duplicate and make redundant much of the curriculum (left or right wing) that is already taught in many disciplinary departments there.

Florida's case is more flagrant, and thus, escalates the scandal. Briefly, the Trump-like governor who challenged Trump in presidential debates in 2024, Ron DeSantis (Trump nicknamed him 'Ron DeSanctimonious'), has replaced several presidents of state-funded universities in Florida. With whom did he replace them? Republican politicians, often of the more conservative bent. Why? Because, as J. D. Vance noted once in a talk to the Ohio senate back in 2021, the 'universities are the enemy'.<sup>7</sup> But are they really? In what way? Because they teach critical race theory or Marxism? Do they not also teach John Rawls on political liberalism and Aquinas on natural law? I can confirm that my education at Northwestern University taught a vast array of thinkers – not just a liberal agenda.

### **Case studies of Trump's interference**

Columbia University, Harvard University, and University of Virginia are three interesting case studies that display the complexity of Trump's programme of interference. Let us tackle each in succession.



First, Columbia University was accused by the Trump administration of antisemitism. The letter sent to Columbia from the Department of Health and Human Services<sup>8</sup> lists out several instances of antisemitic behaviour and disruption, which occurred all over Columbia University's campus (and apparently ninety-nine incidents of antisemitism or anti-Arab bias at Johns Hopkins University was tracked by the government too and included in that 7 January letter<sup>9</sup>). I believe, in general, that this letter corresponds to reality and thus to true events. The president of Columbia University agrees, which he outlined in a letter of response to the government that is public.<sup>10</sup> Columbia recently decided to pay the government 200 million USD in order to have research funds released to it. This is in large part an admission of guilt by Columbia that its campus reflects an unsafe space for Jews and other minorities.<sup>11</sup> Michael Roth, the president of Wesleyan University (annual tuition of \$72,000<sup>12</sup>), in a recent interview with NPR, suggested that Trump's accusations of antisemitism function more like a cudgel than a genuine concern for safety. Roth says, 'This is like using antisemitism as a cloak to do other things, to get universities to express loyalty to the president.'<sup>13</sup> I wholly disagree with Roth. The letter sent by the Department of Health and Safety gives specific events, locations, and dates for each of the antisemitic disturbances. Columbia University never once challenged the Trump administration on these accusations. Columbia instead owned up to them and issued a statement that it would make its campus more safe and secure.

What Trump is doing with Harvard and the University of Virginia is complex and scandalous. What appeared as accountability in the face of increasing antisemitism in the case of Columbia University appears as scandal in the cases of Harvard and the University of Virginia (UVA). Here, in these two specific cases, it seems rather obvious Trump is simply uncomfortable in the extreme with DEI programmes that ensure inclusivity and diversity and that he wants these universities and others to cancel all DEI offices and initiatives.

The letter sent to the Harvard president on 11 April 2025, produced by the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services (whose Secretary is R. F. K. Jr), accuses Harvard of failing to live up to civil rights standards and academic professionalism. It asks that by August 2025 Harvard make every effort to reduce 'the power held by faculty (whether tenured or untenured) and administrators more committed to activism than scholarship'. The letter lists out several other complaints, such as Harvard's

failure to implement fair merit-based admission and hiring practices. It also requests Harvard to ‘reform programmes with egregious records of antisemitism or other bias’. Not least, the Trump administration demands ‘student discipline reform and accountability’ as well as the ‘discontinuation of DEI’. Also, because why not, masks must be banned comprehensively on campus.<sup>14</sup> This letter constitutes nothing less than a clear and present danger to American universities everywhere – a real scandal. Here Harvard, whose standing is as a private university, need not comply with the federal government if it should not wish to do so. Belligerent coercion is on full display by Trump and his ‘departments’. Harvard can implement any admission or hiring practices it wishes, as long as they are not discriminatory; it can also retain the freedom to permit students and staff to wear a mask on campus. Obviously, antisemitism should be stamped out, but there is little evidence that Harvard suffers like Columbia on this front. Harvard’s president, Alan M. Garber, wrote that he should support the university and its community in ‘upholding our values, defending our university’. In an open letter dated 21 April 2025, the Harvard president (who is himself a Jew) writes that he knows very well ‘that there are valid concerns about rising antisemitism’. Harvard will fight hate with the urgency it demands. But ultimately, it sees Trump’s letter as an act of intrusion or interference: ‘We stand for the truth that colleges and universities across the country can embrace and honour their legal obligations and best fulfill their essential role in society without improper government intrusion. That is how we achieve academic excellence, safeguard open inquiry and freedom of speech, and conduct pioneering research – and how we advance the boundless exploration that propels our nation and its people into a better future.’ Well said.<sup>15</sup> But now Harvard, as of 12 August 2025, is considering paying Trump a half billion dollars. Financial coercion is effective and efficacious.<sup>16</sup>

The University of Virginia president, Jim Ryan, resigned in protest at Trump on 27 June 2025; he did so to save millions in funding for UVA and thus to save many jobs that would otherwise have been cut. He sacrificed himself for the greater good of the Charlottesville community.<sup>17</sup> This time it was the Department of Justice that sent the letter on behalf of Trump. It declared, in a series of seven letters, that Jim Ryan was guilty of violating Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which precludes discrimination on the basis of race. The letter accuses UVA of prioritising minorities in its admissions process. Another letter, dated 16 June 2025, says such race-based

admission is unlawful and that liability on the part of UVA would mean that it has violated the Civil Rights Act. Employees and students, so the letter claims, have complained to the federal government. A final letter sent to UVA, dated 17 June 2025, indicates that the government is losing patience with UVA's slow response. UVA's preferential treatment of racial minorities cultivates racism. The Department of Justice tells UVA that 'Racial discrimination is immoral and abhorrent. Most of all, it is illegal.' The evidence provided by the Trump administration lay in the details concerning applicants both accepted and denied. They say that the McIntire School of Commerce at UVA accepts candidates generally with a high grade point average (3.7), which amounts to something like an A-average (very good). But the programme, so the Trump letter claims, admits regularly minority candidates with low grade point averages below 3.0 (which is very low by American standards), and it denies admission to non-minorities who show excellent marks nearing perfect (which is 4.0 or an A in the American vernacular).<sup>18</sup> Interesting if this is true. But this kind of interference from the Trump administration will not be cured by the resignation of the UVA president.

Many other universities are currently negotiating with the Trump administration. The number is unclear, but it could be that as many as sixty universities have entered into formal talks with Trump;<sup>19</sup> many respond with anxiety that federal funding will be rescinded. I know a colleague at a Catholic university of excellent standing who suffered the recension of a half a million dollar grant for no reason. Obviously, that is not much money in the larger scheme of things. The project survived in spite of the cancellation of the grant. But the funds were lost nonetheless. As someone who works in the university sector, and specifically in the humanities, I would be despondent at such a loss. A half a million USD can generate postdocs and PhD research for the humanities.

I have conveyed above that many universities require unrealistic tuition fees. They grow their endowments at the expense of ordinary citizens who take on way too much debt. This should be investigated. This should change. But the irrational and chaotic cancellation of so many funded projects by the Trump administration signals that universities shall need to consider next steps for further financial independence that relies neither on student debt nor government grants.

Interference or accountability? It depends. On what does it depend? Trump's mood, or so that is my guess. Trump expressly wants 'viewpoint

diversity’. That’s fair. But at what stage can we ask what other viewpoints Trump has contemplated. Trump’s narrow-minded approach to higher education leads to the exact opposite of what a rigorous education should foster: a nimble mind that can engage in the exchange of reasons, ponder both sides of an argument, and appreciate the many shades of grey in between. Trump fears a nimble mind. His strategy is not to ‘philosophise with a hammer’, as Nietzsche would have it, but rather to deploy a sudden display of power – a threatening letter with an ultimatum is his usual weapon – which tends to provoke a fight-or-flight reaction. The conservative values, the so-called merit-based admission and hiring practices, and the threats of funding freezes, which all the letters sent to the universities exclaim, communicate a bald binary: comply or freeze.

*Dr Joseph Rivera lectures in the School of Theology, Philosophy, and Music at Dublin City University. His main research areas are phenomenology, the philosophy of religion, and political philosophy.*

#### Notes

- 1 Northwestern, ‘Cost and Aid: A World-Class Institution Can Be Affordable for You’, <https://admissions.northwestern.edu/tuition-aid/>
- 2 United States Department of Education–Ronald J. Daniels, letter, 7 January 2025, <https://ocrcas.ed.gov/sites/default/files/ocr-letters-and-agreements/03242140-a.pdf>. The letter dates to before his inauguration.
- 3 [https://search-prod.lis.state.oh.us/api/v2/general\\_assembly\\_135/legislation/sb117/04\\_PH/pdf/](https://search-prod.lis.state.oh.us/api/v2/general_assembly_135/legislation/sb117/04_PH/pdf/)
- 4 Ohio State University, Salmon P. Chase Center for Civics, Culture, and Society, ‘Mission’, <https://chasecenter.osu.edu/about/mission>
- 5 Megan Henry, ‘More Ohio Universities Added to Senate Bill That Would Create “Intellectual Diversity” Centers’, *Ohio Capital Journal*, 29 June 2023.
- 6 Henry, ‘More Ohio Universities’.
- 7 Lauren Lassabe Shepherd, ‘“The Universities Are the Enemy”: Why the Right Detests the American Campus’, *Guardian*, 6 May 2025.
- 8 Committee on Education and Workforce–Armstrong, Greenwald, and Shipman, letter, 13 February 2025, [https://edworkforce.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2.13.25\\_columbia\\_letter.pdf](https://edworkforce.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2.13.25_columbia_letter.pdf). See page 5 for the enumeration of specific antisemitic disruptions.
- 9 United States Department of Education–Ronald J. Daniels, letter.
- 10 <https://president.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/03.21.2025%20Columbia%20-%20FINAL.pdf>
- 11 <https://apnews.com/article/columbia-trump-deal-00eef5dca9f003e593d2cb151f5cce17>
- 12 <https://www.wesleyan.edu/admission/affordability-and-aid/cost-of-attendance.html>
- 13 <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/17/nx-s1-5366667/trump-defunding-university-antisemitism-wesleyan>
- 14 <https://www.harvard.edu/research-funding/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2025/04/Letter-Sent-to-Harvard-2025-04-11.pdf>
- 15 <https://www.harvard.edu/president/news/2025/upholding-our-values-defending-our-university/>
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