



The Review | Opinion

By [Joy Connolly](#)

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After only 11 weeks in power, the Trump administration has done enormous harm to American higher education. It has radically cut the federal work force that supports scientific and scholarly research, museums, and libraries. Its cap on the indirect-cost rate for National Institutes of Health grants has shut down lifesaving programs and abruptly ripped funding away from some of the world's best faculty and graduate students. Its threats to reduce federal funding to some of the nation's leading research universities are chilling the study of issues and areas key to national security and social and environmental well-being.

The arrests of student activists and delays at border crossings are giving faculty and students good reason to worry that government officials are tracking their behavior on and off campus and preparing retaliation. The recent examples of fiscal intimidation include a [review](#) of up to \$9 billion in grants to Harvard on the grounds that the university has done too little to combat antisemitism, a [similar review](#) at Princeton with no specific reason given, and the warning to [45 research universities](#) across the country with ties to the Ph.D. Project, a small nonprofit focused on diversifying graduate business programs. All of these are indicators of the administration's grim vision for the future of higher education in the United States.

Faculty, staff, and students around the country are asking: Where is the battle plan for resistance? Why isn't my college or university or professional organization speaking out? Mary Dana Hinton, president of Hollins University, [has argued](#) that presidents' top priority right now is communication with their own campus communities, and that this takes energy — and rightful precedence — over

trying to address the public. Meanwhile, some leaders *have* spoken out, notably [Michael Roth](#), president of Wesleyan, and [Christopher Eisgruber](#), president of Princeton. More are stepping up.

### **Faculty, staff, and students around the country are asking: Where is the battle plan for resistance?**

However, these voices remain scattered — at least, so far. The reason higher education has not offered a coordinated response to the administration’s attacks is that it is not designed to do so.

Higher education in the United States has long been built on competitive fragmentation. Whether or not they are highly selective (which describes fewer than 200 of the just over 3,600 public and private nonprofit postsecondary Title IV institutions across the nation), schools compete against each other for students, faculty, and funding. Everything in their institutional design makes collaboration, coordination, and shared planning very difficult, as anyone who has tried to organize co-teaching across institutions or multischool research initiatives knows.

Mitigating this fragmentation are the bodies made up of college and university leadership, like the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, the Association of American Universities, and the American Association of Community Colleges. But ingrained habits of competing for resources, revenue, and talent continue to hinder cross-institutional planning, particularly at times of crisis. The instinct to compete is part of what keeps leaders on campus and behind closed doors with their own governing boards (and, in the case of public institutions, with legislatures and governors).

### **What Will Trump’s Presidency Mean For Higher Ed?**



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Over the past two centuries, competitive fragmentation and plurality of purpose have benefited higher education too much for it to pay the high cost of coordination and coalition. Faced with challenges positive and negative — explosive growth in the 1940s and 1950s, student protest in the 1960s, public defunding in the 1980s — our disconnected system has proved resilient.

Today's challenges require a new, more coordinated approach.

The Trump administration isn't acting in a vacuum. It's exploiting the erosion of public trust in colleges, which has been building for decades. DOGE shows no signs of stopping its campaign against what the administration publicly calls out as the enemy.

To defend their missions, institutions of higher education must overcome the habits that have kept them siloed. No one wants a rigid Five-Year Plan to govern the nation's thousands of colleges and universities. But it is time to draw more assertively on the associations that tie institutions together. In times of trouble, they strengthen resolve and encourage action.

Their power is precisely in their collective nature. Unified voices can say things that individuals cannot. They can take a strong stand on the fundamental values on which the whole enterprise of higher education stands and falls — academic freedom, the high commodity of scientific and scholarly expertise, the proven benefits of a diverse campus community, and the freedom of campuses from interference by the federal government — making these values into norms and thus empowering individual to defend them, campus by campus.

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The collective voice of associations helps presidents remind trustees and supporters of the broader context in which the institution operates. It emboldens presidents and trustees to stand firm together in their commitment to protect their students and faculty from harassment and to defend their institutions' fundamental role as the stewards of knowledge. It helps protect institutions from being picked off one by one.

There will never be — in fact, there shouldn't be — an American Medical Association-type group to speak on behalf of all American higher education. The system is too diverse and plural for that. But it is the moment for long-established groups to use the power of the collective and speak out in a louder voice in defense of academic freedom and the value of inquiry.

Few colleges are able to speak out against executive orders. Take the recent, egregious one targeting the Smithsonian, a key element in the infrastructure and public face of knowledge production in this country. The order was met, however, with immediate protests and action alerts from the [American Historical Association](#) and the [American Alliance of Museums](#), among others. Ted Mitchell at the American Council of Education has organized litigation in coalition with the aforementioned American Association of Colleges and Universities and Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, along with 13 leading research universities to challenge the

administration's attempt to cap the indirect-cost rate on grants from the NIH. These actions show the value of coalitions in responding to external pressures.

Public trust in our institutions of higher education has declined over years, and it will take years to rebuild. Right now our colleges (as well as museums and libraries) need a visible platform on which they can initiate an intentional collective project of public trust-building.

This would be an important step in rejecting state interference and rebuilding the nation's trust in academe. It would help clear the path for renewing America's historic commitment to advancing human knowledge.

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## **About the Author**

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