

“If Trump Wins...”

By Steven Brint

A momentous challenge may await academia a year from now if Donald Trump is re-elected as president, and academia is sleepwalking into it. Instead of preparing, many college professors and administrators cling to the idea that Trump will somehow be sidelined. The reality is that a Biden-Trump rematch is all but certain. Many look for signs that Trump’s support in the broader electorate is weak, but what if those signs are illusory? As unpleasant as it may be to contemplate, a Trump re-election is a real possibility.

Behind the scenes, a small army of think tankers, consultants, congressional aides, and campaign staffers have been at work for more than a year crafting higher education policies in anticipation of a Trump restoration. These efforts, if enacted into law, would have far-reaching implications for the future of U.S. higher education. Republican politicians have already shown that they are skilled in calling attention to problems the public identifies with the sector’s priorities. These skills are essential for launching the campaign they envision.

Given the stakes, it is time to look more closely at what a re-election could mean for higher education, and to be clear-eyed about the weaknesses a second Trump Administration would exploit. A principal lesson I draw is that changes in leadership style and narrative approach will be necessary to help the sector defend itself effectively.

The December 9 Congressional antisemitism hearings may offer a preview of what’s to come. When we pull ourselves away from the partisan melee and fallout surrounding the hearing, including the resignation of two Ivy League presidents, we can

see the outlines of a thus far one-sided battle. The maladroit responses of the university presidents provided the necessary pretext for advancing GOP efforts to rein in parts of the academic enterprise they disdain and to redirect university efforts along the lines they champion. The rallying cry already exists in Rep. Elise Stefanik's proclamation that universities "support genocide against Jews." But the right's interest goes well beyond anything discussed by the three university presidents who were grilled by Republicans on the House committee.

Chris Rufo is not just an architect of the fall of Harvard's Claudine Gay and Penn's Liz Magill; he has a plan for remaking American higher education. If Trump wins, he may have the power to implement large parts of that plan. Rufo, the conservative activist behind GOP attacks on critical race theory and anti-racism programs, sees universities as having succumbed to "race and sex narcissism" and as having turned their backs on "the pursuit of truth." He is dismissive of the idea that universities can reform themselves. Administrators are too "weak" and too easily "manipulated emotionally" by faculty activists. For Rufo, the only way forward is to use state power to bring about what he sees as the necessary changes.¹ Triumphant at the resignation of Claudine Gay, he wasted no time [announcing](#) a "plagiarism hunting" fund aimed at "the rot in the Ivy League."

In a panel discussion held at the Stanford Business School last May, Rufo laid out his agenda for higher education: (1) mobilization of the Department of Justice to investigate elite universities for admissions procedures that violate the recent Supreme

¹ Comments by Chris Rufo, Panel on "Academic Freedom and Higher Education Reform" Stanford Classical Liberalism Initiative. May 3, 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLHrony2mns/>

Court ruling on affirmative action; (2) penalties for universities where DOJ finds free expression to be curtailed by social justice priorities; (3) the closing of ethnic and gender studies departments where “ideological capture” is, he believes, most widespread; (4) new hiring procedures that emphasize the importance of a “multiplicity of perspectives”; and (5) termination of diversity, equity, and inclusion offices. His ideal for undergraduate education is a “classically liberal” curriculum, focused on great works.²

At the Stanford meeting, Rufo emphasized that new accountability mechanisms will be required to achieve these ends. The locus of authority will be the agencies of government, including not only the Departments of Education and Justice (purged of people sympathetic to the social concerns of universities, of course), but also reformed regional accreditors whose criteria for re-accreditation reflect the new priorities. Universities are highly dependent on the federal government for research and financial aid funding. The threat of defunding is therefore a powerful instrument in the hands of those like Rufo who have big-stick sanctions in mind. Accreditation has been a recurring target of the right. On the campaign trail [last year](#), Ron DeSantis called accrediting agencies “cartels” and promised an alternative system that would say “We will not accredit you if you do DEI.” Trump has [promised](#) to “fire” accreditors: “Our secret weapon will be the college accreditation system.”

Accreditation is the tip of the iceberg. Proposals for increasing the tax on university endowments, eliminating diversity statements in hiring and admissions, restricting international collaborations, and reducing regulations on online and for-

² Chris Rufo, op cit.

profit colleges are also circulating in Washington.³ Plans to reduce the size and cost of the system are prevalent. The Cato Institute's 2022 higher education handbook for policymakers, for example, argues that "the federal presence in higher education is ultimately self-defeating, fueling huge price inflation and overconsumption. The solution is to avoid the superficial thinking that all 'education' is good..."

On January 20, 2025, a newly elected Republican Administration would assume the presidency armed with policies produced by a network of think tanks and research centers, including the Heritage Foundation, the Goldwater Institute, and Chris Rufo's home base, the Manhattan Institute. Heritage has been instrumental in providing agendas for Republican politicians for more than 40 years. Its current "Project 2025" brings together a coalition of 84 state and national conservative groups, and it has already released a nearly 900-page document, "Mandate for Leadership," detailing the operations of federal agencies with the goal of coalescing "an army of aligned, vetted, trained, and prepared conservatives to go to work on Day 1 to deconstruct the Administrative State." The entire Project 2025 is described by Heritage as a "plan to unite the conservative movement and the American people against elite rule and woke culture warriors" and as "the last opportunity to save our republic." The detailed plans for deconstructing higher education have not yet been revealed but they will almost certainly parallel those that are already circulating in the public domain.

These proposals are tied together by the now-familiar populist narrative that pits "unaccountable elites" against "ordinary Americans." As the Heritage Foundation puts it in their [Project 2025](#) planning document, "Today, nearly every top-tier U.S. university

³ See John Douglass, "U.S. Universities Face a Precipice." *University World News* (November 2023).

president...has more in common with a socialist, European head of state than with parents at a high school football game in Waco, Texas. Many elites' identity, it seems, is wrapped up in their sense of superiority over those people. But under our Constitution, they are the mere equals of the workers who shower after work instead of before.”⁴

In a manner consistent with this framing, conservatives have determined to point their pitchforks at the most prestigious universities first, perhaps on the assumption that the rest of higher education will fall in line once the giants are humbled. As Jim Banks, the chair of the Republican Study Committee, put it in a recorded call with business leaders, “The hearing with university presidents was the first step. The second is the investigation the subpoenas, gathering all of the documents and records. The third is defunding elite institutions.”⁵ Rufo too has spoken of directing DOJ to “degrade the status of elite institutions.”⁶ House investigations of several Ivy League universities are already underway.

The danger of course is that a triumphant Republican populism with these aims could severely injure institutions that are vital to the economic and social well-being of the country. Many of the recent advances in artificial intelligence, cancer treatments, clean energy, gene editing, and quantum computing have origins in elite university laboratories. The social sciences and humanities also contribute. We have a much better understanding of global supply chains, societal breakdowns, educational achievement,

⁴ Heritage Foundation, *Mandate for Leadership 2025: The Conservative Promise*. Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation, p. 10. Retrieved from

https://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf/

⁵ Quoted in Brian Schwartz (December 18, 2023). “Hearings, Subpoenas, Crackdowns.” *CNNBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/12/18/ivy-league-crackdown-house-republicans-plan-to-defund-top-universities.html/>

⁶ Rufo, op cit.

and individual well-being thanks to university researchers in these fields. The social inclusion efforts of universities are easy to mock and sometimes excessive, but they have also introduced important new topics and new talent into higher education and hence into American life.

In addition to the think tank populists, Republicans in Congress will also have a say. Judging from the “College Cost Reduction” bill introduced in January by House Education and Workforce Committee chair Virginia Foxx (R-WV), the Congressional push will be directed toward reducing costs by capping maximum loan amounts students can obtain, providing additional aid for low-income students who make consistent progress toward their degrees, and reforming accreditation by prioritizing student achievement and post-college employment measures. The anticipated additions to Pell Grants would be paid for by penalizing colleges whose students fail to make timely loan repayments. The bill includes provisions that would incentivize colleges to close programs whose students are encumbered by loans they cannot repay and to expand programs whose students tend to fare well in the labor market.⁷ In other words, the Foxx bill would place a heavy hand on the balance sheets against arts, most humanities, and the softer social sciences.

And, of course, a new Republican president would have his own ideas about what should be done. We can predict many of the priorities of a second Trump Administration from the priorities expressed in Trump’s last budget proposal to Congress. The Administration proposed to slash 8 percent from the Department of

⁷ 118th Congress, 2nd Session, “The College Cost Reduction Act.” Retrieved from: https://edworkforce.house.gov/uploadedfiles/foxx_bill_text.pdf/

Education budget, with sharp reductions for public service loan forgiveness and Pell Grants for lower income students. Each of the agencies funding academic science were slated for large reductions, ranging from 6 and 7 percent at National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health to 17 percent at the Department of Energy's Office of Science where clean energy projects are mainly located. Other agencies that fund science, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, were also on the chopping block. And like many of his Republican predecessors, Trump also attempted to eliminate all funding for the National Endowment for the Arts.⁸

More recently, candidate Trump has offered two concrete, if far-fetched policy proposals. The first is for a new system of accreditation heavily weighted toward evaluating colleges on the basis of job placement, evidence of student learning, and curricula that focus on "the American tradition and Western civilization."⁹ The second is for a federally funded tuition-free, open access online university. He has christened this leviathan "the American Academy." It would be funded primarily by taxes on existing universities' endowments, with the focus, naturally, on the largest endowments.¹⁰

Of course, not everything Republicans hope to achieve will be achievable. It will be a heavy lift to bring the regional accreditors into the Republican policy orbit, given that any national-level policy changes would require revision and reauthorization of the massive Higher Education Act of 1965, an endeavor that would not move quickly if it

⁸ John Aubrey Douglass, "U.S. Universities Face a Precipice Under a Trump Presidency." *University World News* (Nov. 8, 2023). Retrieved from <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20231108180022267/>

⁹ Michael Stratford, "Trump Vows to Go After 'Radical left' Colleges, Echoing DeSantis Approach." *Politico* (May 2, 2023). Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/05/02/trump-colleges-desantis-00095007/>

¹⁰ Adam Harris, "Trump Wants to Create a National University?" *The Atlantic* (November 28, 2023). Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/11/trump-free-online-university-american-academy/676153/>

moved at all. And if Donald Trump is re-elected, his “American Academy” seems doomed from the start -- not only by its prohibitive cost but by how closely it resembles the late, unlamented Trump University, which closed its doors in 2010 and was forced to pay out \$25 million to students it defrauded.

Once public emotions are aroused and the agenda is rolled out in policy form, it will be a straightforward matter to identify elements that can be enacted through executive orders and those that require Congressional or state legislation. Nor will it be difficult to find ambitious Congress people or state legislators who are eager to carry legislation. Judging from their public statements, Senators J.D. Vance¹¹ and Tom Cotton¹² and Representatives Dan Crenshaw¹³ and Elise Stefanik,¹⁴ as well as Virginia Foxx, are already chomping at the bit. White House and foundation policy shops will produce and distribute talking points so that legislators are not burdened to construct their own. These talking points may include cherry picked data to provide a thin veneer of rationality. The talking points will be repeated doggedly in committee meetings and floor debates. The opposition will of course take to friendly airwaves to denounce the

¹¹ J.D. Vance, “Senator Vance Introduces Legislation to Crackdown on Illegal Discrimination in Higher Education.” Retrieved from <https://www.vance.senate.gov/press-releases/senator-vance-introduces-legislation-to-crack-down-on-unlawful-discrimination-in-higher-education/>

¹² Tom Cotton, “Senator Cotton Introduces Woke Endowment Security Tax Act to Tax College Endowments.” Retrieved from <https://www.cotton.senate.gov/news/press-releases/cotton-introduces-woke-endowment-security-tax-act-to-tax-college-endowments/>

¹³ Washington Examiner, “Crenshaw Bill Against DEI Oaths is Well Aimed.” *Washington Examiner* (Dec. 26, 2023). Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/editorials/crenshaw-bill-against-college-dei-oaths-is-well-aimed/>

¹⁴ Elise Stefanik, “Stefanik, Keller, Grothman Introduce Restoring Academic Freedom on Campus Act.” Retrieved from <https://stefanik.house.gov/2022/9/stefanik-keller-grothman-introduce-the-restoring-academic-freedom-on-campus-act/>

legislation. Rallies will be held on college campuses to oppose it. But in the end if the GOP has the votes, some of the new policies will prevail against the din of opposition.

University administrators also have a playbook for defending their institutions, but the weaknesses of that playbook are now evident. These weaknesses include a reflexive reliance on policies and processes unconnected to deeply held values, evasiveness in the face of tough questioning, and a failure to understand and respond to the demands of political theater. The transcript of the December 5 Congressional hearing shows that Claudine Gay referenced Harvard policies and processes nearly 30 times without providing any information about the results of these policies. She evaded answering pointed questions no fewer than 15 times. She provided no examples to support her many references to her university's "robust" disciplinary policies or to illustrate how a vibrant culture of "open expression" actually exists on the Harvard campus. Instead, she relied on terse and uninformative statements about her "deep commitment to free expression" and to the "safety and security of all students." Liz Magill's answers followed closely along the same lines.¹⁵

These bloodless responses make for a stark contrast to the emotionally charged language of their Congressional inquisitors. The hearing began with a short video showing hate-filled chanting and acts of intimidation and it continued with vivid illustrations by Republican (and some Democratic) Congress people of anti-Semitic actions on campus, including Jewish students being pushed, spat upon, and punched.

¹⁵ Quotes and calculations from CQ Roll Call Staff, "Transcript: What Harvard, MIT, and Penn Presidents Said at Anti-Semitism Hearing." Retrieved from <https://rollcall.com/2023/12/13/transcript-what-harvard-mit-and-penn-presidents-said-at-antisemitism-hearing/>

The transcript includes passionate condemnations by Republicans of the “moral rot” at the heart of universities and the “poison fruit” of committing to a one-sided approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as many references to murder, barbarism, and mania.¹⁶

The most important message of the December 5 Congressional hearing is that Republicans have learned to capitalize on dramatic events as a springboard to more far-reaching policy changes. Universities have been a punching bag on the right for decades because of their leftish tilt, but rarely have so many cameras and notepads been present to record such a perfect representation of the GOP narrative.

Those who advance to top positions in universities are generally expert managers. Many also have the capacity to charm potential donors. They are not as often practiced politicians or deeply immersed in the intellectual life of their institutions. In part this is due to the division of labor between outward-facing presidents and inward-facing provosts and deans, and in part it is due to the development of a separate administrative track where the issues are finance and budgeting, regulatory bodies, conflict abatement procedures, and enrollment management, not the research and teaching mission.¹⁷

It would be a mistake to call most of today’s university presidents academic leaders. They are managers of complex organizations whose product lines range from athletics to zoology. They are subject to multiple pressures from state legislatures, donors, regulatory bodies, professional associations, faculty interest groups, parents and prospective students. Given the complexity of the role, university boards have over time

¹⁶Quotes from CQ Roll Call Staff, op cit.

¹⁷ See Steven Brint, *Two Cheers for Higher Education*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018, pp. 255-63.

come to the conclusion that outstanding scholars rarely make outstanding university managers. When I examined the careers of university presidents several years ago, only about half of the top 50 research universities and a sprinkling of liberal arts colleges, recruited presidents who had excelled as scientists and scholars. In the others I observed a mix, people with modest academic careers, some who had worked their way up through the administrative bureaucracy without ever professing, and some whose careers had been spent elsewhere -- in political life or, more rarely, in business.¹⁸

Today at the larger and more selective universities a playbook exists for how to handle nearly every situation a president encounters. Because of the many product lines, multiple constituencies, and large number of pressure points, a playbook to guide action is virtually a necessity. Presidents learn to speak publicly only about the recognitions their faculties and students have obtained. Everything else is not for public consumption. Presidents learn to put together task forces when controversies arise. They learn to consult legal counsel before acting and to defer to counsel when resources may be at risk. They learn what is expected in ceremonial occasions and how to perform these duties. They are briefed on how to interact with legislators and how to deflect uncomfortable questions. They learn to promise to look into matters without necessarily intending to do so. They have speech writers to write their speeches, assistants to trouble shoot and mollify, and deans and department chairs to interact with the faculty and students. Most of the time this managerial approach works. But it is not calculated to work in the face of a well-organized political party determined to degrade the institutions they represent.

¹⁸ Steven Brint, *Two Cheers for Higher Education*, op cit., pp. 261-2.

Politicians are handled too, of course, but most are masters of the emotive language that presidents are taught to avoid for fear of repercussions. The December 5 hearing provided a dramatic scene for the collision between the GOP's political playbook and the university's managerial playbook. It demonstrated that the managerial playbook is no match for a determined and well-coordinated political force. Unless that playbook is thoroughly revised, higher education may be facing a diminished future should the GOP regain power in 2025.

What then can be done to avoid this unhappy outcome?

First, universities will need to decide which of the policies that are currently under attack should be preserved or strengthened and which may require reform - or perhaps abandonment. Republicans have attacked university endowments, science funding, the teaching of critical race theory, diversity policies, and academic freedom protections. Some of these commitments will be easy to defend. How can the U.S. compete effectively without robust academic R&D? Congress has so far agreed, but the case must continue to be made effectively.

Other policies will require better defenses than have been offered thus far. Diversity policies are at the top of this list. The idea that the civic mission of universities centers on the racial and gender diversity of faculty and student bodies is relatively new. It became a fixture of university narratives only in the mid-2000s when the first diversity statements were required and DEI offices began to be widely institutionalized. The decline of Republican support for higher education, which began a decade ago, shows an eerie parallel to the diffusion of these policies in the same period. Diversity,

equity and inclusion began as a substitute for affirmative action after affirmative action was hamstrung by the courts. On some campuses, it has proven to be a poor substitute because it is forced into the pretense that all diversity matters even when practices belie the claim. The December 5 Congressional hearings exposed the subterfuge.

As an antidote to the attacks on DEI, university leaders can begin to extol again the broader civic mission of universities. That broader vision included research that provides greater and more valid insight into the world we inhabit; studies that help to solve a wide range of community problems; the development of new technologies to bring jobs and new wealth to states and regions; lectures and performances that bring cultural enrichment to local communities; and the cultivation of future leaders from among the undergraduate and graduate student bodies.

DEI policies are part of this package, but only part. Because they are controversial, they should be defended with concrete evidence of their effectiveness. For example, do DEI offices have measurable effects on the sense of belonging or the level of achievement of students from under-represented groups? Have they helped to retain diverse faculty? If so, how large are these effects? And what costs, if any, have the offices generated for the climate of speech? It is surprising that studies like this are in such short supply.

It is tempting to think that elite institutions should, in addition, begin recruiting distinguished scholars and scientists for leadership roles as opposed to those who have lesser records but lengthy experience in management. After all, excellent scholars might be more likely to speak with knowledge and conviction about the intellectual and

educational accomplishments of their institutions, having contributed to those accomplishments themselves.

What seems more essential is that incoming presidents know when they are actors in a political arena and, understanding this, have the presence of mind to meet the moment. When a Congress person asks why 95% of the Harvard faculty are Democrats, the right answer should come naturally to these new leaders. The right answer is not the one Claudine Gay gave: “We don’t keep track of the political affiliations of faculty,” even if that is true. Others do keep track. The right answer is that academically talented conservatives usually prefer to go into business, legal, or medical careers¹⁹ and that Harvard would welcome qualified conservatives who wish to give up the higher salaries in those fields for the opportunity to research and teach at a world-class university.

Harvard is looking for a new president. One of the criteria should be the capacity to provide the public with straight talk, heartfelt, and with concrete examples to illustrate why their institutions and their institutional commitments are important and how they make a difference. In the current environment, and given the stakes, the tight-lipped and evasive answers of today’s academic managers just won’t cut it.

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¹⁹ Neil Gross, *Why Are Professors Liberal – And Why Do Conservatives Care*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.