

Eagle Forum Report

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Reform Schools

CAN HIGHER EDUCATION BE SAVED?

by Pat Daugherty, Ed.D., retired university administrator and former editor of Eagle Forum Insights.

For several years now, and especially since the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel, American universities have come under increasing scrutiny about their ideologies and campus cultures. The pro-Hamas protests in 2023 and 2024 shocked most Americans to the point that the presidents of Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of Pennsylvania were summoned to Washington, D.C. to explain what was happening on their campuses. Their testimonies were so disastrous that Elizabeth Magill at UPenn and Claudine Gay at Harvard resigned.

Ivy League and other elite universities are not the only campuses to be affected by extremist ideologies. Ever since the unrest of the volatile 1960s, Marxist ideas have crept into all as-

pects of university life. Anti-Western worldviews have been relabeled so many times that supposedly benign exhortations for “tolerance” and “inclusion” have blinded most people to the radical underpinnings of these movements.

How did we get here?

Dating back to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, universities have become simmering cauldrons of social justice activism and a lurch toward identity politics. A pledge to this ideology is a frequent litmus test in faculty and administrator hiring, leading to campus climates where conservative and Judeo-Christian values have few places to thrive. Fortunately, experts such as Christopher Rufo with the Manhattan Institute, Mike Gonzalez with The Heritage Foundation, Stanley Kurtz

with the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and John Sailer with the National Association of Scholars are leading the charge to reverse the devastation of cultural Marxism’s encroachment into higher education, but it is an uphill battle.

No campus is exempt.

I worked in college student affairs at three large state universities and a private church-related university for almost forty years until 2015. All except one are perceived as fairly conservative institutions in the South. Unbeknownst to me, I was a participant in much of the cultural transition because of the subtlety of its advance.

It is easy to see the red flags as I look back, but what made it difficult to discern then was the progressive hijacking of the language. Passionate faculty and staff would declare, “We want all of our students to feel included in our programs and activities!” Of course we do. “We want all of our students to be successful, especially those who have had roadblocks and challenges in their lives!” Again, no one would argue against this.

What I and many of my colleagues did not recognize, however, was the underlying agenda to move as many university policies as possible toward favoring certain “oppressed” groups of students and away from the notion that everyone should have equal opportunities, not because of outer physical characteristics but because each student was duly admitted and therefore deserving of all the university had to offer. The emphasis became a subtle but



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intense social experiment to transform campus and societal norms.

Twenty-five years ago, I saw a shift.

Students from “less valued” groups began noticing the different treatment they received from administrators and faculty. The College Republicans, for example, were charged an extra \$200 “security” fee when they tried to reserve a meeting room for an event. This didn’t happen with the Democrat groups. Conservative student organizations began to experience interrogations about speakers they wanted to bring to campus, and they discovered that they were held to different standards in reserving a campus facility. Most of them reluctantly accepted the new rules because they hesitated to make a fuss.

Not long after I retired, a rabbi who advised an active Jewish student organization on my last campus told me of increasing disruptions of their events by Students for Justice in Palestine. He showed me a shocking video of an SJP incursion at one of the group’s meetings. Pleas to university administrators to rein in these intrusions fell on deaf ears, and since I was no longer at the university, I could not help.

Activists are strategic and persistent.

Having been subjected to social justice dogma since preschool, idealistic college students often jump at the chance to “do good” when they arrive on campus. They usually have ample opportunities with leftist professors, residence hall and student organization programs, and even community service organizations.

For students who want to be teachers someday, colleges of education offer propaganda such as Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility*, and Ibram X. Kendi’s *How to Be an Antiracist* as trusted texts. Prominent professional associations in which faculty and administrators are in-

involved have also been overtaken by radical ideologies that all too often translate into university policies.

Eyes are beginning to open.

Fortunately, more and more people across the country are starting to wake up to the extremism that permeates higher education. It was encouraging in 2023 to see the arrogant Harvard, UPenn, and MIT presidents called on the carpet about the violence we all watched against their Jewish students. They, of course, saw nothing wrong with their policies, but they couldn’t withstand the massive public outcry. Bright light can be a disinfectant.

The same can be said about a recent victory at the University of Florida, whose presidential search committee intended to recommend a documented radical as their next president. Christopher Rufo launched a massive effort to stop this hire, and the resulting pressure forced the University of Florida to reconsider. Also significant was UPenn’s decision to reverse its support of men in its women’s sports, cancelling “Lia” Thomas’s swimming titles and apologizing to the women who were forced to compete against him.

We can do more.

While most of us do not have Rufo’s platform, we can still make a difference in thwarting the degradation of our once-stellar universities. The key is understanding how things work with higher education leaders and which buttons we need to push.

1. Colleges and universities are not used to public scrutiny. I remember the days when there was almost a reverence around professors and their intellectual endeavors. For decades, no one thought to look behind the curtain because the assumption was that college people were doing good work. After all, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were founded to train pastors!

This lack of attention over time

has led radicals to assume they are safe from criticism. With no one looking, their campaigns to insert DEI, antisemitism, and oppressive gender ideology into the campus culture have been largely invisible — that is, until rioters and Palestinian flags appeared two years ago, and Jewish students had to take cover in their rooms because they could not safely walk to class.

2. Alumni tend to be very loyal. They had wonderful years at their undergraduate institutions, and their alma maters can be a significant part of their identity. Most people want to keep their idealistic views, which can make it difficult for them to speak up when they hear about actions that do not fit with what they remember from their college days.
3. State legislators have the same loyalty for state universities. Three years ago I testified before my state’s senate and house committees on higher education in support of a “free speech on college campuses” bill. I had been in charge of “freedom of expression” policies in several of my jobs, and I knew exactly how those policies could be manipulated. Until I provided specific examples of the inequities to which conservative students were subjected, it was difficult for legislators to acknowledge that at their favorite schools many staff and students felt forced to self-censor to keep their jobs and their good grades.
4. University presidents have reliable priorities that usually determine how they react to challenges:
 - a. Donors — for buildings and programs. A huge percentage of a president’s time is dedicated to fundraising.

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- b. Institutional reputation which helps attract donors. The reputation can be based on incoming freshman class grade point averages, federal grants that bring millions of dollars to the institution, and state of the art facilities. University presidents love new buildings and the money that makes them possible.
- c. Because image is so important for donors and higher enrollments, presidents strenuously try to avoid bad news.
- d. Because of this image consciousness, presidents will usually cave quickly to public criticism. This makes it harder for conservatives to be heard because leftists tend to be loud, especially in higher education. Presidents shrink when faced with loud. It is easier for them to just give in and make it go away rather than courageously stand for sometimes unpopular principles.

A critical difference on today's college campuses, however, is that what used to be considered bad or embarrassing news is not necessarily viewed that way anymore. The definitions have changed because of ideological shifts among many of those in charge. Wokeness has become an unfortunate badge of honor, as could be seen vividly among the presidents who were grilled in Washington. This does not mean that there are no more traditionalists, but they are often silenced by the other side.

What can the average person do?

You can make a difference, even if you think your platform and influence are too small. For example:

1. Make phone calls when you see or hear something that concerns you. Call the president's office. Call the chairman of the Board

of Trustees. If you are an alumnus, say that you are tired of seeing your beloved alma mater appearing in the news for outrageous reasons. Always go directly to the top. If their phones ring enough, they will usually demand that the staff do something to shut down the outcry. They will be annoyed at us, but the goal is to stop the insanity. Don't worry about not being liked. Worry about being effective in saving the institution you love. Those who call the presidents' and trustees' offices are the ones who will get the attention. You need to outnumber the calls from the other side.

2. The same is true for state legislators, especially if they serve on their higher education or state appropriations committees. The office staff will admit that as few as five phone calls from constituents will raise an alert. You do not need to prepare a speech because the person answering the phone is probably just checking off "In favor of" or "Opposed to" for the representative.

Since elected officials usually do not want to be interrupted by phone calls and emails, it is important for them to be interrupted on a daily and even hourly basis. Numbers matter. If nothing else, your call will alert them to issues at the universities of which they might be completely unaware.

3. Social media blitzes can be highly effective, both to inform the uninformed and to encourage action.
4. Support turning off the money spigots. These include state appropriations, alumni contributions, and of course, big donors. Some of the Ivy League universities have lost significant donors in the past two years, which will get any president's attention. I know specifically of faculty whose federal

grants have been halted, thanks to DOGE discoveries, because they were spending inordinate amounts of taxpayers' money on junk research. Many academics rely on the gravy train, so being held accountable gets their attention.

Parents, prepare your students.

For parents who feel sure their students won't be faced with such radicalism when they go off to college, be assured that they will. You can help prepare them:

1. Know that classrooms, residence halls, and student organizations are all fertile grounds for conservative and moderate students to be challenged. Class discussions might downplay their contributions, leading many of them to stop participating rather than risk their grades. They need to know, however, that students have MUCH more power than any of us do, so train them to think for themselves and be courageous enough to express their opinions. They might even empower their like-minded classmates to join in on the discussions and question policies.
2. Before applying to colleges, peruse the websites. Especially read the Student Affairs departmental sites (university housing, student activities, student life, or dean of students), and any diversity/equity/inclusion missives. Read mission statements. Don't be afraid to ask questions at freshman orientation.

Be energized, not depressed.

The atmosphere in our country has changed under President Trump's and his cabinet's leadership, and it is important that we take advantage of the momentum. Turning the ship around will be a slow process, of course, but we have voices that deserve to be heard. It is not too late to start returning sanity to higher education. 

SCREEN DAZE IN SCHOOLS

by Clare Morell, Senior policy analyst, Ethics and Public Policy Center.

There have been a lot of recent attempts to get phones out of schools. The data make clear that phones inhibit students' learning, cause and exacerbate discipline issues, and harm students' mental health. Evidence is also clear that phone bans work. Bans improve academic outcomes, especially for the lowest-performing students, and also improve the social environment.

While phones may be the worst culprits for distraction from learning during the school day, the "educational" screens many children are using in their classrooms, like Chromebooks, tablets, or laptops, are also hurting academic outcomes.

Despite the push to get every child a laptop or tablet, the so-called 1:1 laptop policy has failed students. Student math, reading, and science scores have been on the decline in the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic certainly contributed to recent drops in scores (and "virtual learning" on screens at home didn't help), but the numbers have been declining since 2012.

The lowest performers are falling further behind. Screens were supposed to help solve these education inequalities, but that doesn't seem to be panning out.

A study on the impact of children's access to computers on educational outcomes found that despite the technology gap, educational attainment did not increase, and the schooling gap between private- and public-school students persisted.

Other research sheds light on why this is the case. A study out of Norway found that students who read text on computers performed worse on comprehension tests than students who read the same text on paper. Another study using MRI scans of 8-to-

12-year-olds showed stronger reading circuits in the brains of those who spent more time reading paper books than those who spent their time on screens. Neuroscientists at the Teachers College of Columbia University found "evidence that children's brains process written texts more deeply when they are presented in print rather than on a digital screen."

The reality is that learning on screens does not yield the same benefits as learning on paper.

Maryanne Wolf, an education scholar at UCLA, is concerned that the skimming encouraged by screens — rapidly becoming the new norm for reading — is making us lose the deep reading processes that are necessary for literacy and learning. She says, "The digital elephant in every classroom and home is whether our youth will develop full literacy."

Writing schoolwork out by hand also has cognitive benefits that typing on a screen does not. One study showed that tracing out the ABCs, as opposed to typing them, leads to better and longer-lasting recognition and understanding of letters. Writing by hand also improves memory and recall of words, which lays the foundation for literacy and learning.

Not only does the medium negatively affect educational outcomes, but the screens themselves are also distracting from actual learning. One mom said her daughter was having trouble focusing on the teacher because the other kids were playing video games on their tablets. These kids were using the school-provided screens to search anything and everything during school hours, including pornography.

Common Sense Media has found that nearly a third of teens have viewed pornography during the school day.



Of these teens, 44 percent had viewed it on a school-issued device.

One teacher said they can't stop it, because by the time they get to a student's desk, the student clicks away from the site. The schools are not able to block sites fast enough.

A learning environment for children should not entail the distractions of constantly available video games or pornography or the bombardment of distractions on the screens of their peers. But parents feel powerless to change it. Unlike smartphones, which are within a parent's power to opt out of for their child, school-issued screens are often forced upon parents and families against their will. Some parents are pushing back, however, asking that their kids be screen-free and complete their assignments by pencil and paper.

It is the job of schools to educate children and screens are antithetical to learning. They aren't reducing the achievement gap or improving learning outcomes for our kids. Evidence from phone bans shows that removing screens does more to reduce educational inequalities and improve test scores than not. It's time to get *all* the screens out of schools. 

EAGLE FORUM

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