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the radical right and the university: reclaiming value neutrality in higher education

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Radical right parties, movements, and actors on both sides of the Atlantic have reproached universities for creating an intolerant left-wing intellectual and institutional climate. They have made repeated calls to restore neutrality in higher education to protect freedom of speech and academic freedom. A closer analysis reveals that these critiques are less about neutrality and freedom, and more about exerting their own politico-ideological influence on universities. Yet, the insincerity of many such critics should not obscure the broader fact that a problem of excessive normativity (and relatedly, growing public disconnect) may indeed exist in higher education. Rather than engage in political polarisation and partisanship, universities – both at the professorial and administrative levels – could benefit from mobilising a principled notion of value neutrality, as conceptualised by Max Weber, as an academic value in itself.

Keywords: academic freedom, freedom of speech, higher education, radical right, value neutrality

In its policy booklet on reforming education in France, Marine Le Pen's party Rassemblement National (RN) (2022) emphasised the necessity of "strengthening the requirement for *absolute neutrality* of members of the teaching staff in political, ideological and religious matters vis-à-vis the students entrusted to them" (p. 14, emphasis added). During the presidential election campaign in 2022, when the President of the University of Nantes sent an email to students and professors urging them to vote against Le Pen, RN President Jordan Bardella strongly criticised the "violation of neutrality" that university leadership demanded (cited in Bariéty, 2022). These examples from France are illustrative of a broader trend observed in the Western European and North American right-wing political scene, namely the ostensible defence of liberal values such as freedom of speech – and specifically on campuses, academic freedom and neutrality. This article seeks to exemplify the various manifestations of that rhetoric, assess the extent to which they represent authentic concerns about liberties, and inquire whether universities can indeed do better in upholding neutrality as part of their mission.

In what follows, the article begins by defining its key concepts and summarising the literature that discusses the radical right's varied positions concerning higher education. Utilising purposive sampling, I then turn to a selection of empirical cases in Western Europe and North America to showcase the specific grievances voiced by these actors regarding the ideological climate in universities, and their plea for greater neutrality, freedom of speech, and academic freedom. The subsequent section compares and contrasts such discourses with their policy frameworks, where many right-wing actors simultaneously envision a top-down reshaping of universities in line with their worldviews rather than adhering to any meaningful notion of neutrality or freedom. The last two sections, finally, synopsise the contemporary liberal arguments for reclaiming academic

freedoms and emphasise the ongoing relevance of Max Weber's notion of value neutrality for professors as well as their institutions. Although these principles may not offer a panacea, the article argues, they merit being rescued from manipulative uses and taken seriously as a way forward for universities.

Defining Key Concepts

Three distinct yet interconnected concepts come to the fore in the discussions around liberties in the university setting: freedom of speech, academic freedom, and neutrality (Levy, 2015, 2024a, 2024b). Despite their interchangeable use in public discourse and some overlaps, the first two concepts are fundamentally different from each other. Freedom of speech is a "neutral and adverbial principle of justice" broadly maintained as a human right by liberal democratic states, while academic freedom is specific to universities' "professional ethic" as "a purposive community" (Levy, 2015, p. 274). Academic freedom is the "freedom of the scholarly association to engage in the core functions of discovering, teaching, and preserving knowledge – the functions, paradigmatically, of the laboratory, the classroom, and the library – according to scholarly disciplines, norms, and practices, without external rules of dogma or ideology" (Levy, 2024a, p. 4). Beyond this "professional zone," university campuses also serve as "free speech zones" for expressions that are not strictly academic – public lectures, journalism, activism, etc. –, "where the only restrictions are those of society at large" (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2018, p. 77). There is no consensus, however, on whether guaranteeing freedom of speech in general is central to universities' mission or merely incidental to their primary task of upholding academic freedom (see, e.g., Simpson, 2020). Still, most agree that included in academic freedoms is the protection of extramural speech, namely scholars' views expressed outside of the academic/university context (or of the "professional zone"), which fall beyond "the jurisdiction of the academic association" (Levy, 2024a, p. 15). Finally, institutional neutrality refers to universities' "commitment not to declare an orthodoxy" on social and political issues. Given the diversity of opinions in a scientific community, this is crucial for ensuring academic freedom, as imposing an official point of view would inevitably "chill the freedom of its members to pursue their own ideas and arguments" (Levy, 2024b).

As for the concept of the radical right, three defining characteristics have been attributed to parties studied under this category in Europe: nativism, populism, and authoritarianism. The first refers to an ethnoculturally exclusionary form of nationalism; the second mobilises a moralistic worldview that forges an antagonism between the virtuous "people" and the corrupt "elites," and the third envisions a hierarchical and highly disciplined social order (Mudde, 2007). Global comparisons have found the same three attributes in radical right movements outside of Europe, albeit with varying levels of emphasis and in culturally specific forms (Rovira Kaltwasser & Zanotti, 2023). On the political spectrum, the radical right is often understood as situated between the mainstream right and the extreme right. Unlike mainstream conservatism, radical right parties tend to hold a consistently anti-establishment stance that is in tension with the institutions, procedures, and checks and balances of the liberal democratic order. Yet, unlike extreme right movements that aim to overthrow the democratic-constitutional regime, the radical right generally respects the rules of the party-political system. In real-life politics, the lines between these conceptual categories may become blurry, especially when mainstream right parties incorporate the ideologies and policies of the radical right to varying degrees – as seen in the transformation of the Republican Party under Donald Trump—or when extremist groups fuse with some elements of the radical right (Brown et al., 2023; Pirro, 2023)*1*.

Radical Right Perspectives on Higher Education

How do parties and movements that are classified within the radical right political family approach higher education? This is a relatively new field of research that does not allow for clear-cut generalisations valid for all such actors in the Western world. A "growing heterogeneity" exists within the radical right across nations, as geographical, cultural, and historical variations produce different policy visions and priorities (Taggart, 2017, p. 248). Disparities notwithstanding, some interrelated features have been commonly observed in the literature. First, some of these parties may prioritise expanding vocational educational training while limiting resources and accessibility for higher education. Second, within higher education, they may be inclined to emphasise "meeting the needs of society" by focusing on natural and technical sciences at the expense of social sciences and humanities (Berg et al., 2023). Third, due to their low trust in higher education institutions, and the generally low representation of their voter base within them, they may seek to exert more government control over these institutions through centralisation (Jungblut, 2016). Fourth, stemming from a nativist outlook, some of these parties aim to restrict foreign students and other international collaboration initiatives in universities, such as those led by the European Union (EU) (Van der Wende, 2021). Fifth, depending on context, they may also frame universities as hotbeds of left-wing radicalism that oppose national values. While that critique goes back at least to the Cold War (Giudici, 2021), today it takes novel forms that reflect the contemporary culture wars and polarisation, most visibly in the United States. In this view, university "elites" propagate antinational agendas such as immigration and cosmopolitanism, cultural Marxism, equity-diversity-inclusion (EDI) schemes, wokeism, gender ideology, critical race theory, or *islamo-gauchisme* (the supposed alliance between leftists and Islamists), among many others—and they silence any dissenting voices that deviate from their left-wing dogma (Miller-Idriss, 2020).

Neutrality and Freedoms: The Radical Right to the Rescue

To address this perceived intolerant radicalism, many right-wing parties and on-campus movements have endorsed a combination of freedom of speech and academic neutrality as a rallying call. The examples discussed below are selected based on purposive sampling—or more specifically, typical case sampling (Douglas, 2022, p. 418) – that highlight some of the most widely studied instances of radical right politics in the social scientific literature. Although by no means exhaustive, the countries included feature prominent North Atlantic cases such as France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, and the United States. To varying degrees, many of the actors in question have been identified as strategically using an ostensibly liberal posture on multiple issues, including freedom of speech, to make their rhetoric more palatable to wider audiences (Brubaker, 2017; Moffitt, 2017; Peker, 2022).

Exemplifying the call for freedom of speech on campuses, Donald Trump signed an executive order in 2019 to "guarantee free speech on campus" and explained his motive as follows: "If a college or university does not allow you to speak, we will not give them money. It's that simple" (Inside Higher Ed, 2019). When a public talk by Marine Le Pen at Paris Dauphine University was cancelled due to student demonstrations, she filed an official complaint with the public prosecutor's office to protest that "my freedom of expression … was clearly hampered" (RN, 9 December 2011). Often, such restrictions on freedom of speech and academic freedoms are attributed to the dominance of left-wing actors on campus. The Danish People's Party [DF] (2024), for instance, observes that "there is a tendency for a left-wing bias to prevail in Danish universities," which "threatens versatility and pluralism." To address the issue, it argues, "freedom of research, scholarship and freedom of

expression must be protected at Danish universities. That is why we want to enshrine the Chicago principles[2] in the University Act." The Swiss People's Party (SVP), likewise, writes in its programme that against "extremist" tendencies and those "who oppose diversity of opinion," "universities must … guarantee freedom of expression for students, professors and speakers" (SVP, 2023, p. 104). Realising this objective, it is argued, requires the independence of universities from political and ideological influences. The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) (2024), for instance, warns in its programme against any "ideological interference with the autonomy of the sciences," and as Gruber and Schnell (2023, p. 7) note, it declares a stance against "politicising educational institutions that should remain apolitical spheres of knowledge acquisition, 'free of ideology'." The Swedish Democrats (SD) highlight that "the political control of higher education must be reduced and the academy's independence increased" (SD, 2022, p. 38). The Alternative for Germany (AfD) claims that "science must be free of ideological constraints," which is why we must "strengthen the autonomy of universities" to "preserve freedom of research and teaching" (AfD, 2016). Complaining about the "(self) censorship of students and staff" in universities, the Flemish Interest in Belgium (VB) (2024, pp. 47, 77) also advocates for "research and innovation policy that is not dictated by political agendas" to ensure "the restoration of academic freedom and freedom of expression at our universities and colleges." Professors, likewise, need to commit to neutrality. Jérôme Sainte-Marie, who runs member training for the RN in France, voices this concern by stating that on the left, "you find a lot of academics" who are "breaking with the axiological neutrality demanded by their profession. This says a lot … about the state of French universities." Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands similarly states in its 2023 election booklet that at all levels of education, "we want politically neutral teachers for the classroom and politically neutral textbooks in the classroom. It is not that difficult for a teacher to do that. In the morning, put his or her political beliefs on the coat rack along with his or her coat to hang" (PVV, 2023, p. 32). Examples can be multiplied.

Comparing Rhetoric and Reality

These positions on neutrality and freedoms are accompanied, sometimes in the very same documents, by contradictory policy frameworks that call for direct government interference with the content of research and teaching in universities to correct the perceived ideological bias. Many of these calls specify particular areas of study and viewpoints that need curtailing. The Alternative for Germany, for instance, advocates for "no more 'gender research'" in higher education because "gender research does not meet the demand that must be made of serious research. Existing gender professorships should no longer be filled, ongoing gender research projects should not be extended further" (AfD, 2016). The Danish People's Party (DF) (2024) argues that "activist research does not belong at the university" and proposes "to set up a National Research Council, which intends to take action against … activists who have chosen to become academics and university lecturers," especially in "well-known areas; gender studies, post-colonialism, race studies, etc." Belgium's Flemish Interest (VB, 2024, pp. 47, 77) contends that rather than "climate and woke dogmas," research should prioritise "major themes that keep Flemish people awake at night, such as immigration." It adds that "an independent investigation into the presence of woke ideology in the entire Flemish education system" must be carried out to resolve the problem. The Swiss People's Party proposes limits on student admissions in the social sciences and humanities to create "a university landscape better oriented towards the economy and value creation" and commits to steering educational institutions away from "ideological teaching such as gender politics and sex education, even consumer protection and the environment, which is hostile to the economy" (SVP, 2023, pp. 102, 104–105). Although not inscribed in their party programme, the Swedish Democrats

have long been critical of universities' research priorities. They suggest, as one researcher reports, that "gender studies must disappear from Swedish academia," and they demand a shift of focus from "racism, multiculturalism and discrimination" to "research on Sweden's cultural heritage and Swedishness" (cited in Myklebust, 2023). The Party for Freedom (PVV, 2023, p. 32) similarly resents the rise of "political indoctrination" in the Dutch education system, especially on themes such as "climate activism, gender insanity and a sense of shame about the history of our country," and adds: "We want education that is free from political activism." Also targeting activist radicalism, RN spokesperson Laurent Jacobelli asserts that in France, "there is *islamo-gauchisme* in our faculties, in our universities," and insinuates that active government intervention is needed, because asking higher education institutions to investigate this problem "is like asking Al Capone to investigate drug trafficking" (Ouest-France, 2021). In many of these accounts, the supposed left-wing ideological bias of universities and professors is discussed as symptomatic of a larger crisis in the education system at all levels.

The United States is an instructive case that exemplifies what these positions may look like in practice. During the 2010s, right-wing politicians, media, and campus movements systematically critiqued universities from the perspectives of free speech and academic freedom. A common strategy was to provoke liberal pushback by inviting controversial non-academic right-wing celebrity speakers (like Milo Yiannopoulos) and then protesting against perceived silencing and censorship if these events were disrupted or cancelled (Binder & Wood, 2012). In the 2020s, however, "that emphasis has … faded away, in favour of an open willingness to suppress teaching, research and speech about race and gender that conservatives dislike," which is carried out by Republican governors (Levy, 2024b). The aggressive restructuring of the New College of Florida, a public liberal arts college, is a case in point. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis overhauled the college's board of trustees by appointing several conservative education activists, such as Christopher Rufo. Within a short period under Rufo's leadership, the president and the provost were replaced, the EDI office was abolished, and at least three dozen professors left the college. Rufo also closed down the Gender Studies department because it is one of many programmes that, according to him, "do not align with the mandate of the taxpayers who generously support them," and because women students "caused all sorts of cultural problems" and made the college a "social justice ghetto" (cited in Young, 30 August 2023). Since 2023, more than 80 bills have been introduced across the United States with the intent of eliminating EDI offices and staff, diversity statements for faculty, and mandatory diversity training, among other measures. Many of these bills follow Florida's lead in going beyond EDI and directly "violate academic independence and free speech by attempting to forbid certain ideas in the classroom," especially those related to race, gender, and American history (Friedersdorf, 2024). It is estimated that the eventuality of Trump's re-election with a Republican legislative majority in 2024 would scale up such initiatives to the national level to "remake higher education as we've known it," as "think-tankers, consultants, congressional aides, and campaign staffers have been at work crafting higher-education policies in anticipation of a Trump restoration" (Brint, 2024). Such an overhaul is deemed necessary because, as Trump himself put it, universities are "turning our students into Communists and terrorists and sympathisers of many, many different dimensions" (as cited in Harris, 2023). Although not yet as extreme as other cautionary tales such as Hungary and Turkey (Grigoriadis & Işık Canpolat, 2024), the American example suggests that the radical right's advocacy for academic neutrality and freedoms is often fleeting, instrumental, and disingenuous.

Reclaiming Neutrality and Freedoms

Should the insincerity of such critics lead us to conclude that there is no issue of undue normativity in universities today? Should bad faith pleas for academic neutrality and freedom be a reason for denying the relevance of these concepts altogether? Many liberal critics[3] of contemporary higher education institutions respond negatively to these questions, arguing that universities can indeed do better—through their own initiatives rather than through government impositions—to create an environment that nurtures scholarly exploration, inquiry, and debate. This critique, while not uniform, generally invokes the previously defined interrelated categories of freedom of speech, academic freedom, and neutrality.

Regarding the first two, liberal critics cite universities' tolerance, or even enabling, of ubiquitous incidents of 'deplatforming' of speakers, physical disruption of classes and events where lawful, if controversial, opinions are shared, and various forms of intimidation towards faculty and students expressing unpopular views (Lai, 2023). Activist groups' efforts to restrict speech on campus, as well as many students' and professors' preference to remain silent out of fear, unavoidably hampers the free exchange of ideas. This problem, which concerns both the "professional zone" and the broader "free speech zone" on campuses (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2018), does not seem to be sufficiently taken seriously, problematised, or addressed by universities (Revers & Traunmüller, 2020; Whittington, 2019). According to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, academic freedoms are systematically challenged in the United States. Between 2000 and 2022, more than 1,000 formal attempts were made to get academics sacked or disciplined for things they said, two-thirds of which resulted in sanctions, and a fifth in firing. The attempts came from both the political left (52%) and the political right (41%) of the scholars in question (Frey & Stevens, 2023). Similar assessments have been made about the "ill-health" of academic freedoms in EU countries (Beiter et al., 2016). Specifically, the contradictions between academic freedoms and certain EDI initiatives, and universities' low threshold for pursuing formal investigations over speech-related complaints have been called into question (Friedersdorf, 2022; Khalid & Snyder, 2023; Mounk, 2023).

Finally, neutrality applies at both institutional and professorial levels. At the first level, universities' willingness to be socially relevant and maintain good relations with various stakeholders (current and prospective students, donors, governments, social movements, etc.) has led them to regularly publish official statements that adopt a range of political positions. Liberal critics have noted that such declarations create an undesirable environment for the free pursuit of ideas and arguments, because "no one in the university or any of its departments should be made to feel like an 'insider' or 'outsider' depending on his or her views." Especially today, when society is "deeply polarised and people of different political perspectives are more likely to demonise than to engage with one another, universities … must provide a model for a healthy community where people of different viewpoints can engage with each other in a civil manner and coexist" (George, 2023). The gist of the liberal critique, therefore, can be summed up as follows:

> [Universities] can recommit to academic freedom, freedom of extramural speech, and institutional neutrality, starting now. That will mean, for example, … a clear stand against professors using their classrooms as political platforms; a refusal to adjudicate and police the meaning and intent of extramural political slogans or social-media posts; and the discipline to avoid adopting institutional political platforms on foreign, political or social policy. With those rules in place, they can provide the site and space for students and faculty alike to study, explore, discuss and debate, to celebrate, mourn

and protest, even the most divisive questions in political life. (Levy, 2024b)

Lessons from Weber

How about professors? To be clear, while academic freedom flourishes thanks to institutional neutrality, it does not require neutrality on the part of the professors—at least not in the same way. On the contrary, academic freedom is precisely what allows professors to contribute freely to research, teaching, and public discourse without being ostracised for their views (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2019). This professorial liberty, however, comes with an ethic of responsibility, or a "plain duty of intellectual integrity," as Max Weber famously argued in his 1917 lecture "Science as a Vocation"[4]. It is worth revisiting some of the key points of this highly influential lecture which, more than "one hundred years since Weber delivered" it in Munich, is "still being analysed and used to interpret the current state of science and politics" (Osetinsky, 2024). Given the inevitable power hierarchy between professors and students, Weber contends that "politics is out of place in the lecture-room," and he deems it "irresponsible" for professors "to exploit the circumstance" by "imposing from the platform any political position upon the student, whether it is expressed or suggested." The substantive reason Weber cites for value neutrality is that science is simply incompetent to resolve value disputes. Normative positions about sociopolitical life cannot directly follow from the empirical study of such phenomena—or as Weber put it, "the impossibility of 'scientifically' pleading for practical and interested stands"[5]. Recognising this scientific limitation, one should not lose sight of the fact that "we are placed upon the platform solely as teachers." Although many students may "crave a leader and not a teacher," Weber insists that "the prophet and the demagogue do not belong on the academic platform." This also means that professors should be prepared to teach students "to recognise 'inconvenient' facts," namely those that do not strictly align with one's political views.

Weber's distinction between facts and values is also extended to the research process, where being mindful and transparent of one's own partialities and avoiding imposing them on the conclusions of scientific inquiry is essential to a scholar's 'duty of searching for the truth.' The so-called 'value-free' position of Weber, however, does not naively suggest that science can be completely delinked from values, despite such claims made by Weber's critics (see, for instance, Abbott, 2018). Instead, Weber argued that "evaluative claims can be *distinguished* from factual ones," but he insisted that the knowledge produced by social science should be value-relevant—in other words, "social science must aim to be neutral as regards practical values, only addressing factual questions, but at the same time practical values are used to determine what are worthwhile topics for investigation, thereby helping to ensure that the results are relevant to significant public issues" (Hammersley, 2024, pp. 31, 34, italics in original). Rather than imagining them as two independent spheres, Weber therefore acknowledges the various associations between facts and values and invites scholars to be constantly reflexive about them as an integral part of knowledge creation and dissemination. Yet outside of one's academic role in research and teaching, for instance "when speaking in a political meeting about democracy," Weber highlights the significance of academics' extramural speech as citizens, where "to come out clearly and take a stand is *one's damned* duty" (added emphasis).

For more than a century, Weber's well-known position on value neutrality has been subject to criticism from both the left and the right of the political spectrum (Bisztray, 1987; Vogt & Weber, 2020), but it also continues to shape the conversation and inspire many others (Brown, 2023; Cohen, 2024; Hammersley, 2017). It is beyond the scope of the present work to explore the intricacies of

this debate, nor do I wish to imply that Weber is the sole reference point on this question[6]. Yet from the perspective of this article, Weber's insistence on value neutrality for professors is intimately linked to – and complementary with, although distinct from – the ideal of institutional neutrality for universities as a means to ensure academic freedoms and freedom of speech on campus. As the 1967 Kalven Report stated regarding institutional neutrality, "the university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic. … To perform its mission in society, a university must sustain an extraordinary environment of freedom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures. A university … must embrace, be hospitable to, and encourage the widest diversity of views within its own community"[7]. Weber's point is that as the main beneficiaries of such a liberal institutional framework, professors should strive to exercise their extensive privileges with an ethic of intellectual-educational integrity, responsibility, and humility.

While the principle of value neutrality, both at the professorial and administrative levels, is notoriously difficult to attain and will always be imperfect, it arguably remains the best ideal to uphold for maintaining the autonomy, societal relevance, and scientific mission of higher education today. This is especially true in an era when the concepts of freedom and neutrality as relating to academia are increasingly appropriated and instrumentalised by political parties or other politically motivated actors, as this article sought to demonstrate with ample evidence from the radical right. Reclaiming these ideals matters, because as Wendy Brown (2023) writes in her recent work on Weber,

> Preserving the scholarly realm for the relative autonomy and integrity of thought … means resisting both the hyperpoliticisation of knowledge and its structuration by relations of dependence – state, economic, or philanthropic … A moat between academic and political life is … vital to protecting reflection, imagination, and accountability in knowledge production and dissemination.
> […]
> Such scholarly and pedagogical work … has potential for indirectly enriching the public sphere, and at the same time for burnishing the integrity and reputation of the academy. At a time when both domains are in peril and disrepute, this would be no minor accomplishment. (pp. 63, 98)

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Efe Peker is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Political Science at the University of Ottawa (Canada), where he is the director of the research axis "Populism, Diversity, and Social Cohesion" at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Citizenship and Minorities (CIRCEM). His research focuses on state-religion relations, secularity, immigration and diversity, and nationalist-populist politics in comparative-historical perspective. He is the co-editor of the 2023 book Populisme et sciences sociales: Perspectives québécoises, canadiennes et transatlantiques (Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa).

1. This is why the radical right and extreme right are at times studied together under the broader category of the “far right” (Pirro, 2023).
2. Adopted by the University of Chicago in 2014, the Chicago Statement is a set of guiding principles on freedom of speech in universities: https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf
3. By liberal critics, I mean those inspired by the classical liberal perspective on freedom of speech and academic freedom, which includes many mainstream conservatives, social democrats, and leftists.
4. To access the text online: https://sociology.sas.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/Weber-Science-as-a-Vocation.pdf
5. This, however, does not mean that professors and researchers should not talk or write about values. On the contrary, as Brown (2023) puts it, a Weberian approach views academia as a place where values should be “analyzed historically and theoretically, and considered in the contexts of the specific powers that mobilize and transmogrify them. It is where they can be examined genealogically, culturally, economically, and psychically” (p. 102).
6. For instance, Bruno Latour’s work on the social construction of scientific facts and Lorraine Daston’s writings on objectivity are among many sources that would critically engage with the discussion on neutrality and knowledge creation in academia.
7. To access the report online: https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt_0.pdf