

the pursuit of knowledge in a democracy: academic freedom and activism

Sally Haslanger

The article explores current attacks on higher education in the United States, situating funding cuts, visa restrictions, and ideological interventions within a broader conservative project to weaken Enlightenment principles of freedom, equality, and public reason. It revisits the historical foundations of academic freedom and highlights the university's dual role in producing reliable knowledge and fostering democratic citizenship. Against this backdrop, the text argues that safeguarding academic inquiry requires extending protections to all members of the academic community and raises the question of whether academics have not only the right but also a responsibility to engage in activism.

Keywords: academic freedom, activism, democracy, higher education

As I write in the spring of 2025, we are in the midst of a crisis in the United States. The crisis is economic, social, political, and legal. One dimension of this crisis is the attack on higher education by the Trump administration. To date, this attack has included:

- cuts to funding for existing federal grants to higher education
- substantive content restrictions on applications for new grants
- deporting, or cancelling visas of, international students and scholars without due cause
- denial of entry into the United States of international scholars travelling for academic or research activities
- increases to the amount of overhead that universities must pay to support federal grants
- threats to increase endowment tax on universities from 1.4% to as much as 35%, and
- closure, or severe cuts to funding, of libraries, museums, and archives

These actions are unprecedented. Yet, there is no serious effort to offer legal justification for these attacks. Instead, accompanying the actions are vague or spurious allegations of antisemitism (Roth, 2025) or the misrepresentation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs (Lasell, 2024).

The immediate actions are part of a broader conservative plan to reshape the government in the United States in a way that amasses power in the executive branch. The plan is described in Project 2025 (Dans & Groves, 2023) and is supported by key figures in the current administration. For example, in a 2021 speech, J. D. Vance argued that “we have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities in this country” (National Conservatism, 2021, 0:35–0:46). Christopher Rufo, a highly-influential conservative activist, stated in an interview with the *New York Times* in March 2025 that “[a] medium- or long-term goal of mine is to figure out how to adjust the formula of finances from the federal government to the universities in a way that puts them in an existential terror” (Douthat,

But why take aim at universities? How does undermining higher education promote the Project 2025 agenda? What is the deeper rationale for this anti-intellectual movement? Any answer is, of course, controversial. However, it is clear that the conservative ‘mandate’ positions itself in opposition to several key liberal principles, derived from Enlightenment values. One central principle is that the role of the state is to promote freedom and equality of individuals in the pursuit of their own conception of the good. In contrast, the contemporary conservative agenda valorises some conceptions of the good as imperative for all. For example, in decrying LGBTQ+ rights, they insist on a re-entrenchment of the traditional heteronormative family structure: “Our Constitution grants each of us the liberty to do not what we want, but what we ought. This pursuit of the good life is found primarily in family—marriage, children, Thanksgiving dinners, and the like” (Dans & Groves, 2023, p. 13).

Another key Enlightenment principle at stake is that the state should be secular and rely on deliberation in terms that all could, in principle, accept, avoiding, e.g., arguments based on religious doctrine. Rawls (1996), for example, articulates this in terms of a reasonable pluralism: “Reasonable persons, we say, are not moved by the general good as such but desire for its own sake a social world in which they, as free and equal, can cooperate with others on terms all can accept” (Rawls, 1996, p. 50).

Political deliberation must rely on public standards of inquiry and methods that are reliable, e.g., inferentially sound, and in the context at hand, uncontroversial. Rawls suggests that

an agreement on a political conception of justice is to no effect without a companion agreement on guidelines of public inquiry and rules for assessing evidence. The values of public reason not only include the appropriate use of the fundamental concepts of judgment, inference, and evidence, but also the virtues of reasonableness and fairmindedness as shown in abiding by the criteria and procedures of commonsense knowledge and accepting the methods and conclusions of science when not controversial. (Rawls, 1996, p. 139)

If scientific inquiry (broadly construed) is considered a standard for public deliberation, and it does not support the conservative agenda, then it looks like there is a practical two-stage process for removing it as a barrier to political power: first, discredit it (or at least render it controversial), and second, use the claim that it lacks legitimacy to destroy the institutions that enable it. Without a shared commitment to standards of careful reasoning and empirical evidence, the academy looks like a bastion of unreasonableness that may be ignored in politics, or worse, dismantled. Thus, there is reason to fear that the organisation of society based on science and open inquiry, and the values of liberal democracy itself, are at stake.

Academic Freedom/

The idea of academic freedom has very old roots. Insofar as inquiry aims to be objective—to provide knowledge of the world itself—there is reasonable resistance to at least certain forms of interference by the state, religion, and other faith-based cultural institutions.

European universities, as early as the ninth century, aimed to provide “communities of competent

inquirers” (Haskell, 1996, p. 45). These universities were supported by religious institutions, private donors, and governments; the nature and content of research was correspondingly restricted by those who paid the bills. However, as means of communication increased, the communities of inquiry expanded to include research specialists across institutions and, in time, to form what we now consider disciplines. Disciplines provide communities of intensely interactive, skilled, critical inquirers who maintain an evolving set of standards for reasonable belief in a domain (Scott, 1996).

In Europe, a more specific vision of academic freedom emerged with the scientific revolution, often marked by the publication of Copernicus’s *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*) in 1543. In 1626, Francis Bacon’s fiction *The New Atlantis* (published posthumously) described a utopia in which a college, Solomon’s House, allowed scientific research to proceed according to Bacon’s own principles of induction and scientific inquiry, unconstrained by limits imposed from without. This vision, in turn, is often taken to be the basis of what is commonly known as the Humboldtian University, named after Wilhelm von Humboldt who founded the University of Berlin in 1810 (now Humboldt University) with the ideal of combining basic research and teaching with a focus on individual autonomy and academic freedom. In the Humboldtian University, the pursuit of knowledge is strongly connected to *Bildung*, i.e., personal growth and self-realisation.

These highlights in the history of academic freedom suggest that one could defend academic freedom in a variety of ways, e.g., based on the value of objective knowledge, or individual rationality, or autonomy. The pursuit of knowledge is valuable in itself and also as part of a meaningful and autonomous life. However, another, more political, defense of the right to academic freedom rests on a conception of deliberative democracy. This is especially relevant in responding to the current conservative efforts to erode standards of public reason and, at the same time, higher education.

In order to make good decisions, individually or collectively, we need to rely on a body of knowledge.² We should not assume that the knowledge we have is enough to solve our problems or that a belief is false just because it is unpopular. In deciding how to organise our collective life, we should be informed by a wide range of ideas, perspectives, and have the resources to develop new knowledge. However, not all ideas are equally sound, and we should aim, together, to weed out confusions and mistakes. Of course, we cannot each consider every idea that comes along, so we need to develop collective and systematic ways of evaluating beliefs. Given the complexity of any domain of inquiry, it makes sense to turn to experts. Academic freedom serves as way to situate expertise in democratic processes. On this approach, disciplines (and interdisciplinary programs) contribute to a deliberative democracy, as long as they are not themselves controlled by powerful interests and subject to strategic manipulation.

The reliance on experts poses a new challenge, however. Note that in describing public reason as the basis for political cooperation, Rawls emphasised the importance of reasoning that everyone could, at least in principle, understand and accept. In fact, he pointed out that certain forms of expert knowledge did not provide public reasons in this sense: “Among the nonpublic reasons are those of associations of all kinds: churches and universities, scientific societies and professional groups” (Rawls, 1996, p. 220). Presumably, he is thinking that expert knowledge achieved in such institutions is not something we can assume that nonexperts will understand and accept. But then the problem is that a state built upon expertise that is beyond the epistemic powers of the people would be one in which they are ruled by technocrats rather than self-ruled. This, I believe, is one concern

that has motivated the shift to the right in the United States. We are, in some sense, a technocracy governed by economists, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and the like.³ The workings of the government are beyond our (collective) ken, and thus it is tempting to feel left out, and to look for conspiracies behind the scenes running things.

The question how expertise can legitimately function in a deliberative democracy is not a new question. There are several approaches to the problem. One approach is that elected representatives may be tasked with judging and supervising the use of expert knowledge. Another approach suggests that groups of nonexperts (other than representatives) may be involved in reviewing the research for political purposes and communicating its import. A third proposes that nonexperts partner with experts in the production of knowledge. Elizabeth Anderson (2011) defends a view more directly related to our discussion. She argues that “[t]he solution to our problem is [...] to show that laypersons have the second-order capacity to judge trustworthiness and consensus, and access to the information needed to make such judgments”. She proposes that the judgment of trustworthiness rests on three “assessments” (2011, p. 145). First is that those purporting to have specialized knowledge actually have the relevant skills and background to make warranted claims on the topic. Second is that the experts are honestly reporting the findings, i.e., that they are neither lying nor misleading in their reports. And third, those offering expert knowledge are epistemically responsible, i.e., they engage in “responsive accountability to the community of inquirers” (Anderson, 2011, p. 146). Establishing a right to academic freedom is one way of institutionalising epistemic responsibility.⁴

Institutionalising Academic Freedom in the United States: The AAUP

In the late 19th and early 20th century United States, there was concerted effort to ensure that appropriate conditions for public inquiry were met. John Dewey, Arthur Lovejoy, and others established the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in 1915 with the specific aim of articulating and protecting principles of academic freedom (AAUP, n.d.-b). The issue of freedom arises at two levels: the freedom of disciplines to define for themselves, as a community of peers, the standards for their discipline; and the freedom of individual researchers to explore beyond the limits circumscribed by the discipline (Dworkin, 1996). These freedoms are institutionalised in tenure: members of the discipline determine the standards by which a researcher qualifies as a member of the community, and once a member of the community, the researcher is free to explore the ideas they individually consider worthy of their effort. Freedom of individual inquiry within a discipline is necessary so that its standards are exposed to critique and are responsive to new, even revolutionary, ideas. With the freedom of a community to shape a discipline, however, also comes the power to exclude some inquirers and their ideas. This can be justified as a necessary part of distinguishing better and worse belief-forming mechanisms, which are at the core of a notion of expertise; but it is also always a legitimate site of contestation.

This description of academic freedom is how American academia is supposed to work, in principle. We are all aware that in practice, things don't live up to the principle. Social power and authority have shaped disciplines explicitly or implicitly by excluding women, persons of color, disabled, members of certain religious groups, and all but the wealthy. And strategic economic and military interests have had a huge impact on the content of research and the standards of the disciplines: what counts as an interesting question, what counts as evidence, what methods are considered reliable, what outcomes are accepted. Because some marginalised researchers have succeeded in breaking through the tenure barrier, standards are changing; interdisciplinary programs often

provide intellectual communities for such innovation. Such inclusive research is better suited to provide the basis for public deliberation. However, research requires substantial funding, and even if a university, in principle, protects a scholar from infringement of their academic rights, the lack of funding for certain topics may, de facto, undermine their capability to pursue their work.⁵ As usual, negative freedom is not a sufficient condition for genuine freedom.

Tenure, however, is reserved for the few. An educational institution must, in effect, make a lifelong commitment to the individual it awards tenure, so in times of economic stress, the academy relies instead on temporary contracts to teaching assistants, postdocs, adjuncts, lecturers, and other research and teaching staff.⁶ Such “contingent faculty” are absolutely essential to both the research and teaching missions of a university. As a result, the argument for academic freedom, as a freedom to study, to teach, and to publish, applies beyond those who are tenured and should apply also to non-tenure-track positions.⁷ This is affirmed both in the AAUP recommendations on academic freedom and by the Supreme Court.⁸

A college or university is a marketplace of ideas, and it cannot fulfill its purposes of transmitting, evaluating, and extending knowledge if it requires conformity with any orthodoxy of content and method. In the words of the United States Supreme Court, ‘Teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding; otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die.’ (AAUP, n.d.-c)⁹

Extramural Speech

The right to academic freedom is not among the rights specifically guaranteed by the US Constitution. However, courts have consistently upheld it. For example, in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306, 329 (2003) Justice O’Connor wrote for the majority that “We have long recognized that, given the important purpose of public education and the expansive freedoms of speech and thought associated with the university environment, universities occupy a special niche in our constitutional tradition” (Levine & Nasir, 2022, n.p.). ¹⁰ In addition, the courts have also protected what is called ‘extramural speech’, i.e., speech by academics *in their role as citizens* that addresses matters of public concern. The right to extramural speech is not directly protected by academic freedom which aims to produce knowledge and requires disciplinary scrutiny. Nevertheless the right of academics to speak publicly is intimately tied to the rationale for academic freedom (Whittington, 2023). To prevent faculty from speaking, as citizens, undermines the purpose of the university, for a crucial role of the university in a democracy is to enable scholars and researchers to bring knowledge to public debate and policy decisions. If faculty members could be punished or dismissed for what they say in public—whether they speak as experts or not—then this would stifle their participation more generally and compromise the university’s democratic function (Whittington, 2019). In other words, if universities have this crucial place in a thriving democracy, then bringing one’s voice to the political domain is part of an academic’s job, and one should not be punished for it. This is a right one holds against one’s university employer backed by a combination of academic freedom and freedom of speech.

Activism

Should academics be involved in political activism? It would seem to follow from what I have just

argued that it is not only permissible, but there is a *pro tanto* duty within a democratic polity for academics to participate in public debate on topics where they have expertise, and to contribute to the broad array of views worthy of consideration. This allows that some kinds of expertise are more relevant than others, and that not all personal opinions are valuable contributions. So it is compatible with the relevant speech freedoms to criticise some individuals for offering confused or ill-informed ideas and others for staying silent. The fact that one has a right to speak does not entail that one ought to; but sometimes one ought to for the sake of the polity, even if there are individual costs.

In the contemporary context (at least in the US), sometimes the term ‘activism’ is understood as disruptive resistance—protests, direct action, strikes—associated with ruptural change. In response to this trend, Astra Taylor has affirmed the importance of protest, but has also called attention to the fact that in recent years *activism* has too often become disconnected from *organising*.

To be an activist now merely means to advocate for change, and the hows and whys of that advocacy are unclear. The lack of a precise antonym is telling. Who, exactly, are the nonactivists? Are they passivists? Spectators? Or just regular people? In its very ambiguity the word upholds a dichotomy that is toxic to democracy, which depends on the participation of an active citizenry, not the zealotry of a small segment of the population, to truly function. (Taylor, 2021, p. 38)

She insists that organising is essential to any movement:

... organizing is cooperative by definition: it aims to bring others into the fold, to build and exercise shared power... Raising awareness—one of contemporary activism’s preferred aims—can be extremely valuable (at least I hope so, since I have spent so much time trying to do it). But education is not organizing, which involves not just enlightening whoever happens to encounter your message, but also aggregating people around common interests so that they can strategically wield their combined strength. Organizing is long-term and often tedious work that entails creating infrastructure and institutions, finding points of vulnerability and leverage in the situation you want to transform, and convincing atomised individuals to recognise that they are on the same team and to behave like it. (Taylor, 2021, p. 39)

One phrase often used in social movements is “educate, organize, mobilize.” In the academic context, education is an obvious space for intervention: we can contribute through what we teach in our courses, the points of view we bring to debate, the research that can be used to inform and shape complaints and demands. More controversial, perhaps, is whether academics have a role in organising and mobilising.

In his article, “The Role of Philosophers in Climate Change”, Eugene Chislenko (2022) has argued that philosophers, in particular, have multiple roles to play in addressing climate change, but I take it that these roles extend to other social movements, and also to academics in other disciplines, with some adjustment of topic. Some of these roles we have already discussed:

- *The theoretical progress view*: “philosophers should contribute to addressing climate change

primarily by making progress on the difficult ethical, epistemological, metaphysical, conceptual, and other philosophical problems it raises” (Chislenko, 2022, p. 782).

- *The ordinary citizen view*: “philosophers should contribute to addressing climate change primarily through lifestyle changes and political activity, rather than as philosophers” (Chislenko, 2022, p. 783).

Of course, it also makes sense to put these two together in a *hybrid view*, i.e., do research *and* change your individual behavior. However, Chislenko argues that we can and should do more, as philosophers (and more generally, as academics), for we have much more to offer by virtue of our professional expertise. He defends

- *The skill view*: “philosophers should contribute to addressing climate change primarily through the use of our philosophical skills. By ‘philosophical skills’, I mean the skills philosophers characteristically develop and use as part of doing philosophy” (Chislenko, 2022, p. 784).

Chislenko includes specifically our pedagogical and administrative skills, including our writing ability, and “ones we develop as teachers and advisors in areas such as facilitating discussion, public speaking, presenting ideas in accessible ways, building relationships with young people, supporting others to develop and defend their views, and challenging people to think critically about some of their most strongly held beliefs” (Chislenko, 2022, p. 784). We also have relevant skills developed “as administrators and members of institutions and larger organizations through experience serving on committees, organizing events, working with a range of colleagues, and running departments and educational programs” (Chislenko, 2022, p. 784).

In the context of considering the role of the university in a democracy, I’ve focused on the intellectual contribution of academic inquiry and our responsibility to contribute knowledge and expertise. But, given Chislenko’s argument, are we also permitted to, and perhaps even have a duty to, use our pedagogical and administrative skills to organise and mobilise communities? Should we be activists?

In considering the role of universities in a deliberative democracy, academic freedom is focused on the need to develop collective and systematic ways of evaluating beliefs and *producing* knowledge. However, universities also have a pedagogical role in *sharing* knowledge, educating others to become experts, and fostering critical capacities, creativity, and originality. This happens both within classrooms, and also potentially outside of the institution altogether. And the administrative skills we develop to promote discussion and collective deliberation within a university are valuable tools for both organising and mobilising communities in pursuit of justice. Arguably, insofar as the university is an institution that plays a crucial functional role in democracy to enable well-informed, engaged, and collaborative participation, the skills developed through academic life are rightly used to promote justice.

Conclusion

The intentional destruction of higher education in the United States is part of a larger challenge to democracy. The ideal of a liberal democratic state is one that protects freedom and equality to live in accordance with our own values; it is a secular state organised through the exercise of public reason informed by epistemically responsible expertise. Higher education built upon academic freedom exposes students to multiple points of view and gives them skills of critical reflection as

they form their conception of the good; it also contributes to political debate essential scientific knowledge that bears on our most pressing problems. Yet, in the past several years, there has been a carefully crafted effort to undermine trust in the academy through misinformation and false allegations. Those who seek to undermine democracy recognise that academic freedom and open inquiry is one of the pillars that keeps it standing. They aim to gain power and impose their own cultural values on others and are using our principled openness to different points of view to discredit us. Those who believe in democracy cannot let this happen. Now is the time for academic activism.

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1. This section draws on my article for the MIT Faculty Newsletter, see Haslanger, 2021.
2. I assume that all of us are capable of having knowledge. I have knowledge about myself, my family, my neighbourhood because the beliefs in question are true and I have good evidence, or justification, for them. I can also have true beliefs that aren't knowledge because I'm just lucky. Perhaps I look at the clock and it says it is 4:02 pm, and it is 4:02 pm; so I have a true belief. But the clock stopped yesterday at 4:02pm and I just happened to look at it at the right time. That is a true belief that isn't knowledge. A body of knowledge, as I understand it, is a set of significant interconnected propositions that support each other and that we have good reason to believe.
3. As I see it, the United States is also a plutocracy, a gerontocracy, a patriarchy, a White Christian ethnocracy.
4. Of course, even good institutions do not guarantee that nonexperts will correctly judge that experts are, in fact, epistemically responsible. And, as Anderson (2011) discusses, there is currently "a troubling divergence between scientific and public opinion" (p. 153). This shifts the question, however, from what legitimates academic freedom to how we can convince the public of its legitimacy.
5. On the inadequacy of solutions that resort to philanthropy, see Haslanger, 2020.
6. According to the AAUP (n.d.-a), "Contingent positions that are ineligible for tenure now account for nearly 70 percent of all instructional staff appointments in American higher education, including 49 percent part time and 19 percent full-time non-tenure-track."
7. Given the argument for disciplinary autonomy, an individual's right to academic freedom should apply within disciplinary and interdisciplinary hiring structures. Another argument would have to be offered to extend the right beyond that and cannot be provided fully here. The right of independent scholars to research and teach may not strictly fall within academic freedom, but instead in a right to freedom of expression.
8. Membership in the AAUP is open to any professional teaching or research staff at a college or university, including graduate students, postdocs, and contingent faculty.
9. See also *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, 385 U.S. 589 (1967), p. 385.

10. For more information about the case, see: Grutter v. Bollinger, n.d.