

# Universities ≡ AND ≡ Identity Politics

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What's the link?  
And what can donors do?

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Are college campuses training young Americans in balkanization and grievance politics—and thus functioning as the fountainheads of national division?

*Philanthropy* asked experts and donors. Here's what they said.

## Peter Wood

President

National Association of Scholars

Anti-racism, or as it is often now put with deific capitals, Anti-Racism, is the captivating idea now on college campuses across the country. Of course, anti-racist edicts pour forth not just from college presidents, but also corporate boardrooms, owners of NFL teams, Hollywood studios, high-tech Xanadus, publishing houses, and just about anywhere that voices can be raised in tones of cultural authority. But college campuses are the deep well from which that authority flows. If nearly every other sector of society now speaks in hushed deference to the need for anti-racism, it is because the leaders of these sectors have all been to college. Several generations of not-quite-indoctrination have left their mark.

I say not-quite-indoctrination because immersion in American higher education is different from a sojourn in a North Korean re-education camp. The food is a lot better, for one thing. Not-quite-indoctrination is a subtler form of persuasion. It involves pleasant surroundings, much moral congratulation, and lots of self-approval. Not-quite-indoctrination begins in persuading students that they are *chosen*, because they see things more deeply than others, including their parents. To think of this as a form of snobbery is not wrong. Successful appeals to the young and naive always involve some flattery.

And that flattery produces susceptibility. Once they are admitted to the charmed circle, no one wants to be told he or she is failing to live up to the elevated standards of the priesthood. A community formed around the idea that “we are the righteous, exceptional members of our generation” becomes vigilant in maintaining that picture of itself. It sternly calls out those who slip. These days that means reporting them to the campus Bias Response Team, mounting a Twitter mob attack, “cancelling” them at social events, Title-IX-ing them, or pinning them as “racist.”

Not-quite-indoctrination would not work at a college committed to teaching the old liberal arts. If students faced a college curriculum that demanded

careful attention to the greatest thinkers and texts across history, they would be brought up short in two ways. First, the students’ inflated sense of their superior insight and moral purity would be cut down to size. Not many people will imagine they are smarter than Michael Faraday or more statesmanlike than Lincoln once they’ve really absorbed the issues those predecessors wrestled with.

Second, students immersed in a deep liberal education would be denied the refuge of the Simple Clear Answer. The great ideas conflict at every turn. Plato sounds awfully convincing. So does Aristotle. Both can’t be right. Adam Smith’s explanation of markets is brilliant, but so is Marx’s. Every subject worthy of study is rife with competing ideas. A classical education challenges students to work through these complexities. We call that “the pursuit of truth.”

Today we have allowed college to be turned into something very different. It has become a conveyor belt for simplistic ideas about “social justice,” and claims that our society is a conspiracy of powerful people who are only looking out for themselves. That raw cynicism is now dressed up in pseudo-sophisticated jargon of Marxist theoreticians such as Antonio Gramsci and Herbert Marcuse, or filtered through the cunning prose of Michel Foucault. And the ideas get transmitted: Today’s colleges and universities give graduates a sure conviction that the game is rigged, and therefore only suckers play by the rules. We call that “the pursuit of power, by any means necessary.”

That’s what the whole anti-racism, *White Fragility*, Black Lives Matter mantra comes down to. And anti-racism is only one face of today’s Identity Politics. The other faces look just the same.

You might hope that decisionmakers outside the university would shake off this simplistic, corrosive form of thinking. They should be pointing out that America is about a lot more than race, domination, and oppression. But in all too many cases their own educations scanted the other parts of America’s evolution: the hard-fought creation of the rule of law; the complicated balance between fairness and achievement; the search for justice in an inherently unjust world.

Philanthropists have one great Hippocratic duty in this situation: Don’t make things worse by funding the supercilious ignorance of the progenitors of Identity Politics. Don’t feed the moral panic of the cowed bystanders. Instead, seek out and support efforts to re-build American higher education on more durable foundations—where intellectual humility and a competition of ideas prevent young people from falling for the falsity of Simple Clear Answers.

That is no simple task. The time, however, is right. The demographic and financial catastrophes that many colleges and universities face right now offer us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to start over, and reshape higher education in healthier ways.

## Heather Mac Donald

Thomas W. Smith Fellow

Manhattan Institute

The wildfire that has been tearing through America’s institutions this summer began on college campuses. It is taking down meritocracy, our history, and the possibility of law and order. The destruction is being wrought in the name of fighting America’s allegedly endemic racism.

The claim that white supremacy is the centerpiece of our society—and the resulting obsession with “diversity”—are now the sole unifying concepts in academia. From the moment a freshman matriculates, he learns that he is either the oppressed or the oppressor. He learns that Western civilization is the source of global suffering. Fantastically, he is even taught to see pervasive racism and sexism on his own campus, the most welcoming environment in history for traditionally “marginalized” groups.

For several decades now, college graduates have carried such delusions with them into the working world. The nostrums of Identity Politics have infused the media. They’ve taken over corporate H.R. departments. They have compromised meritocratic standards in everything from judicial appointments to science faculties.

This summer, grievance politics exploded with unprecedented fury. Having absorbed ample theoretical justification for mayhem during their college studies, well-organized Antifa anarchists assaulted police officers, torched courthouses, and destroyed the life's work of entrepreneurs. Politicians, business leaders, and philanthropists, schooled in the same ideas, barely demurred. Company after company, group after group, denounced the police and America's supposedly constitutive bigotry.

Heretofore I have shrunk from giving up on universities entirely. Their core mission has seemed too precious to abandon: teaching students gratitude for their sublime cultural inheritance. Obviously, most of academia jettisoned that mission years ago. One could still hope, however, that somewhere, someplace, a student would experience the Eros of learning, and plunge headlong into truth and beauty under the tutelage of a charismatic professor, thus keeping alive for future generations the lessons of the classical canon.

I have now discarded that hope. This summer nearly every college president participated in the outpouring of anti-American, anti-rule-of-law rhetoric. None denounced the violence and looting. Ideological claims that our nation is built on widespread oppression are now, more than ever, the official doctrine on campuses. Preferences by identity group, already well-entrenched, will become even more distorting, and the poisonous distrust and accusations used to justify them will grow more extreme.

It is time to walk away from existing universities. Alumni and donors should not give them another cent. Not for cancer research, not for "conservative studies," not for anything. The imperative now is to create alternative institutions. Erect, if you can, a college dedicated explicitly, through indefeasible legal fetters, to the apolitical cultivation of cultural literacy. Fight the pernicious idea that every student needs to go to college in the first place. Valorize the trades, the mastery of machines, the work that men do with their hands and their brawn. Revive and update the

historical traditions of self-instruction, tutoring, and learning through doing and visiting.

We are in a race against time, one perhaps already lost. The more that graduates of our existing colleges enter positions of power, the less chance we have to preserve freedom, prosperity, and knowledge for the next generation of Americans.

## Karith Foster

*Radio host and comedian  
Founder, Foster Russell  
Family Foundation*

If we were to grade how much energy and money we as a nation have spent in efforts to eradicate racism and bias, we'd get an A+. If we grade the effects of the policies being applied in the name of racial progress, however, we earn a big ugly F.

Today's trendiest approaches to "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" have only divided us more. You are only considered "diverse" if you're a woman, a person of color, differently abled, or LGBTQ+. You win victim status! Whereas if you're a straight white male you're automatically placed into the category of villain. What a brilliant concept! Let's fight division by adding more polarizing fuel to the fire.

Whose idea was it to herd everyone into a category that is, at best, one dimensional? As a black American woman I not only find that isolating but insulting to all of our sensibilities. Kierkegaard said, "If you name me, you negate me. By giving me a name, a label, you negate all the other things I could possibly be."

I marvel at how these superficial concepts of diversity are accepted as the only way to promote unity and healing. We cannot continue to delude ourselves by believing these antiquated ways of thinking represent progress. Pigeonholing people by caste and shouting labels in an angry voice doesn't make discrimination more sensible.

First, we must rid ourselves of programs and charlatans that, by design, have focused on what separates and divides

us, while prescribing even more separation by category as the cure.

Then we must re-imagine a way to have conversations that honor all of us. I propose teaching citizens to shift the main focus of our public discussions away from what separates and divides us, and toward the many things we have in common, instead.

We must be introspective—because when you look inside yourself you understand your own value and worth, you see your own humanity, you see the universal nature within all people. As you gaze sincerely within, you notice many rich connections to your fellow creatures, you discover things in yourself that you have also seen in others. We can acknowledge the history, respect the experiences, and honor the unique backgrounds we all bring to the table while showcasing the common humanity that we all share.

Division is a plague on our country today. The intentional divisiveness that is being promoted all around us is a danger as real and threatening as the covid-19 virus. I fear we will not be able to recover unless we set ourselves on a stark course-correction as soon as possible.

## Greg Lukianoff

*President, Foundation for Individual  
Rights in Education*

Way back in the before-times of 2019, I created a list of five ways university presidents can demonstrate their commitment to free speech. If everyone reading this list pressed their alma mater to put the suggestions into practice, we would make huge strides in improving the culture on campus:

*Stop violating the law.* This shouldn't have to be said, but according to FIRE's latest "Spotlight on Speech Codes" report, 88 percent of America's largest and most prestigious colleges and universities maintain speech codes that restrict free speech in violation of the First Amendment or their own promises of openness.

*Actively commit to free expression.* When students see the leaders of their schools publicly pledge to protect free expression, they feel more secure to

speaking their minds. That also sets an important expectation for prospective students—come to campus ready to participate in a wild, free exchange of ideas. A simple way for school leaders to do this is to join the 74 faculty bodies, colleges, and university systems that have adopted the “Chicago Statement” in defense of free speech on campus.

*Defend rights under pressure.* Amidst today’s cancel culture, controversies over speech are inevitable. Mealy-mouthed equivocations and vague statements that the school is “looking into” violations of free speech won’t stop the mobs that shut down speakers. If, however, a university president speaks out early, and unequivocally states that a professor or student will not be punished for protected speech, it makes a huge impact. Time and again that has been the difference between a controversy fizzling out in a few days or becoming a months-long ordeal.

*Teach free expression from day one.* Censorship comes naturally to people, but respect for free expression must be learned. Robust debate is essential to learning, yet few universities now say that. Freshman programs that include a module teaching free speech can increase tolerance for disagreement. To make this easy for universities, FIRE teamed up with New York University’s First Amendment Watch to create a free-speech orientation program that any university can adopt, free of charge.

*Collect serious data on the speech climate.* Before any problem can be solved, it must be recognized. A great way to get universities to recognize their problems with censorship and self-censorship is to have them survey their student body. FIRE will soon gather such data at 50 colleges and universities. Every institution should gather similar information that can’t be waved away with claims that “Other schools are like that, but not mine!”

Recently, I added a sixth suggestion for restoring sanity to the academy:

*Support real alternatives to higher education.* We must find or create alternatives to our current higher-education system that can both attract highly talented students and impress potential

employers. These alternatives should be cheaper, more rigorous, and provide the same levels of credentialing, networking, and broad instruction that tempt students to go to conventional schools. As long as colleges believe they hold a monopoly on your child’s future, they have no incentive to reform. Even the slightest competitive pressure on higher education could make a difference.

Many individuals and organizations have been trying to crack this code for years. Now is the time to identify practical options and innovate as needed. New paths for the young into top-notch careers and adult citizenship, without the proselytizing pressures on individual conscience, are desperately needed.

This list should be unobjectionable to sensible people. Alumni and donors have a unique ability to influence the schools they support. Consider wielding your influence, using this list as a blueprint for change.

## Ayaan Hirsi Ali

*Author: Nomad—From Islam to America, Founder, AHA Foundation*

Identity Politics is a pathogen that developed in the petri dishes of university campuses. It was cultured, matured, and disseminated into the college-educated American population. And now it is spreading like a virus through our corporations, charities, and institutions.

Professor Peter Boghossian has shown how academics developed Identity Politics from a set of philosophical musings they “laundered” into “knowledge” and then drummed into young minds. Students today are far more likely to be assigned to read Robin DiAngelo, Ibram Kendi, or Kimberlé Crenshaw than Alexis de Tocqueville, Friedrich Hayek, or Thomas Paine. And now those young minds are working for your firms and foundations.

Identity Politics is an ideology that separates society into “oppressors” and “oppressed.” Within its power matrix, rankings are determined mostly through inherited traits like race, sex, or sexual orientation. The more “marginalized” traits you have, the higher you rise in the victimhood rankings.

Identity Politics is only one name for this mind virus. It is also variously referred to as critical theory, the social-justice movement, cancel culture, wokeness. My eight-year-old son likes to call it Woked-19.

There is a cure for Woked-19. And the readers of this magazine can be a part of it. “To address the politicization of our expert class, we need a complete reformation of the system that feeds it—the universities,” Orrin Hatch recently suggested. I would argue that this reformation starts with all of you who are college donors.

First, to prevent individuals from being condemned and their careers ruined on the basis of mere accusations, donors should demand that any university they support must establish and maintain a strict system of due process. It has become increasingly rare for basic legal principles such as “innocent before proven guilty” to be applied on campuses today.

Second, donors need to insist on principles of academic freedom. Over the past several months, we’ve seen professors “cancelled” merely for having viewpoints at odds with woke orthodoxy.

Then donors must demand that the army of diversity officers and Title IX officials, who are currently omnipotent on campuses, be retrained or released. These people are often the main violators when it comes to due process and academic freedom. They not only act as campus thought police, they also propagate the demands of Identity Politics through “unconscious bias training” and other forms of indoctrination.

A university education should teach students how to think critically—not what to think, uncritically.

Let’s stop the spread of this toxic mind virus. We must develop herd immunity against it, or better still a vaccine. Together, we can do that.

## Jack Miller

*Founder  
Jack Miller Family Foundation*

The broadest aspiration of Identity Politics, “to reduce the injustices done to particular

social groups,” is a deeply American concept based on the vision encapsulated in our Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Somewhere along the line, though, the Identity Politics movement was commandeered by people with other ambitions. Instead of trying to help everyone enjoy the richness of the American experiment, they want to radically change America, in ways that would destroy the very opportunities every fair person wants to help struggling people grasp.

Colleges and universities became complicit in this campaign both through active endorsement and cowardly acquiescence. Mobs obstructing free speech and attacking property and persons were tolerated. Bullying activists promoting the anti-American style of Identity Politics came to dominate campuses. Even professors appalled by this intolerance remained silent for fear of losing their positions or academic reputations.

Colleges were originally conceived as places where important ideas could be discussed, argued about, and fully explored. Too many, though, have now become locales where ideas that don't correspond with the current concept of right are attacked and suppressed.

To avoid spreading this plague we need to get over the idea that “everyone must go to college.” Many people do not need and will not profit from a college education. We need more learning by doing, more practical career and technical education that doesn't indoctrinate. Virtual instruction can be expanded. Employers should stop requiring a college degree but should instead hire based on demonstrated ability and testable potential.

Other changes must come through the “power of the purse.” The government should stop funding colleges that don't allow free speech and free inquiry. Donors must begin to understand what their charitable investments in higher education are buying. Many make gifts to their alma mater through emotion and without much thought. They need to recognize that their

alma mater may not be the institution they imagine, and may indeed be acting in ways antithetical to their ideals.

Alone or working together, donors can have a major impact on what colleges do. They may even become the starch that administrators need in their backbone if colleges are once again to become places where free inquiry is the norm.

## William Mattox

*Director of the Marshall Center for Educational Options  
James Madison Institute*

In December 1960, a group of Florida A&M students staged a sidewalk protest in front of a department store that served only whites at its lunch counter. The protests were led by Patricia Stephens, a spunky co-ed who always wore sunglasses because her eyes had been damaged by tear gas at an earlier protest.

Patricia and her fellow students carried signs with messages designed to win over those who did not yet agree with them. Or perhaps I should say they sought to carry signs that would convince others, because during the protest a young hooligan ripped up some of their placards and ran away. This action only confirmed the conscience-pricking message of one of their undamaged signs: “The Golden Rule Does Not Apply Here.”

Rather than resorting to threats and intimidation, these student protestors relied on non-violent persuasion to advance their cause. And persuade people they did. Over a four-year period, the Florida A&M students successfully integrated Tallahassee's lunch counters, movie theatres, and swimming pools.

In recent years, I've had numerous opportunities to tell this story to high-school and college students, and I always ask them: *Can you imagine yourself ever behaving like the young hooligan in this story?*

Most say no, and indeed recoil at the thought. But the sad reality is that hooligans interfere with political argumentation all the time on campuses today. Speech which challenges politically

correct doctrine is often shouted down. Speakers like Condoleezza Rice are discarded as unworthy of respectful consideration. Many schools have become hotbeds of intimidation.

The truth is, all of us are capable of trampling on the freedoms of others, capable of doing things that would greatly embarrass us in hindsight. And the temptation to engage in idea suppression is particularly great when one holds overwhelming power—as racists did in the Jim Crow South and as progressives do on today's college campuses.

In her recent book *Hate: Why We Should Resist It with Free Speech, Not Censorship*, author Nadine Strossen argues that “counter-speech” is the best way to challenge ideas one opposes. One of the best things colleges could do to address the illiberal influence of today's “cancel culture” would be to expose every college student, during the freshman orientation process, to “counter-speech” stories like my Florida A&M example.

Students need to understand that idea suppression is a sign of intellectual weakness—a lack of confidence in one's own ideas. And they need to see that those who seek to squelch alternative viewpoints often look quite foolish, and even evil, in the end.

## Leo Linbeck

*CEO  
Aquinas Companies*

What is the root cause of our nation's discontent? Is it really higher education? Why not call out the press? K-12 education? Political parties? Social media? Hollywood? Government at all levels? Large corporations? Philanthropies? Why blame American colleges and universities for our troubles when so many other institutions have been active enablers of our descent into madness?

One reason is that higher education is a common link between all these wayward institutions. Virtually all of the leaders of America's institutions are now selected and indoctrinated by colleges and universities.

America's success in the twentieth century led to centralization and complexity that increased demand for

cognitive skills. That has amplified the prestige and privilege of higher education. Since a college degree is believed to be a golden ticket to money, power, and status, today's smart, ambitious, compliant kids aggressively seek to join the club.

And it's a very comfortable club. Students marinate in a culture of privilege, entitlement, and license. From their arrival on campus they are told they are the elect: entitled, coddled, hardly accountable to anyone. There is, however, one unconditional requirement: They must embrace Identity Politics. Only the woke pass the college gauntlet.

Upon graduation, they re-enter broader society, and find that corporations, the media, entertainment, and other institutions also now grant authority only to those who embrace Identity Politics. To acquire power they must confess, and profess the new creed. The elect then become the elite, and cloak their personal ambitions and institutional missions in fake pieties.

In my view, though, it isn't Identity Politics per se that has triggered the national nervous breakdown currently convulsing American society. Identity Politics and other social pathologies like deterioration of the traditional family, weakening of the rule of law, and declining norms of behavior, are more like co-morbidities. The underlying disease is Godlessness.

By reducing God to a myth and placing human beings at the center of the universe, colleges have become super-spreaders of the modern disease. The pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness is replaced by the pursuit of pleasure, power, and status. Virtue signaling is substituted for the sacrifices of true personal virtue. Entitlement and ego push aside duty and modesty. Under such leadership, civil society becomes less civil and trusted institutions become less trustworthy.

Reforming higher education is an extremely difficult task—though probably not impossible due to today's confluence of a shrinking population of young people, runaway college costs, and now the pressures the pandemic is putting on campuses. The number of higher-ed institutions

that will desperately need a rescue and turnaround in the near future will provide unprecedented opportunities for educational entrepreneurs. Donors could take over, restructure, and redirect some institutions, attracting scholars and students who are tired of the intellectual destitution and intimidation that inevitably follow the institutional embrace of Identity Politics.

Even if higher education can be changed in many places, though, we will still be surrounded by a generation of leaders who fear Twitter more than God. How to fix that? Here's my suggestion: Get on your knees and pray.

## Walter Olson

Senior Fellow  
CATO Institute

Do we know for sure that it's the universities? Because I have a couple of other suspects in explaining the current moment.

There's social media with its instant mobilizations of issue-fighters. Culture wars that might once have taken years to bear fruit can now bring capitulation in a matter of hours or weeks.

There's the related conversion of big parts of the mainline media to a business model of feeding indignation-clicks. As Bari Weiss suggested in her *New York Times* resignation letter, when Twitter becomes the final editor, even once-sober newspapers take on the same weird mix of moral grandstanding and Mean Girl hyper-personalization that dominates Twitter itself.

But there's a less-obvious nominee as well: America's management and H.R. culture. Bear in mind that of the three race-is-everything volumes now atop the book charts, one is by an academic (Ibram Kendi), one by a journalist (Ta-Nehisi Coates), and the best selling of all, *White Fragility*, is by a corporate trainer (Robin DiAngelo).

Name a practice that you think originated in the ideological hothouse of the university, and there's a good chance it was taking off at about the same time or earlier in the business

world. Day-long, mandatory-attendance sessions aimed at extirpating "implicit bias"? Check. Sensitivity readings and ever-growing lists of words not to use? Check. Hinging pay and promotions on social-justice work? Check.

Of course all the sectors I've mentioned above are interlinked. Media organizations and universities have management hierarchies with nannying H.R. departments just as corporations do. And all of these entities have been powerfully shaped—I might say mangled—by legal incentives and lawsuits.

Under the jurisprudence which has evolved over the last two generations or so, higher-ups in any organization can fall into serious legal jeopardy if they decline to act against behavior that someone says made them feel unsafe, or if they fail to discipline managers said to contribute to a "hostile environment," or if they offend colleagues in a legally protected category.

I wrote about this problem more than 20 years ago in *The Excuse Factory*. The legal pressures have since ratcheted up further, thanks to decades of anti-discrimination lawsuits. There has been an explosion of bureaucracy and conformism that can turn almost any act into an office-politics landmine and a complaint to management. Eccentrics are made to walk the plank to protect the organization's image. And in sector after sector we are experiencing "vast extensions of administrative control over American life" (as Tanner Greer has put it). In some ways, tenure and faculty governance allowed universities to sidestep, for a time, the radical new demands in employment law that were transforming other parts of our society.

Today, though, college faculty are being allowed less leeway to steer clear of Identity Politics. There is no check on the grievance culture on campuses or through much of the nonprofit and cultural world. In view of the gale-force winds driving today's orthodoxies on behalf of identity and social-justice classes, any platforms that donors hope to build or restore as alternatives had better be as sturdy legally and morally as the offshore oil installations of the North Sea. **P**