

We Can Not Give Up on Research Universities

by Warren Treadgold

If you want to be hired, tenured, or promoted at a major American research university as a professor, you should either share its ideology or pretend you do. That ideology's basic premise is that the world is divided into oppressors, all of whom deserve condemnation, and groups of oppressed, all of whom deserve compensation. Exactly why this is so, you had better not ask. Since nobody chooses his ancestors, you might ask why descendants of slaveowners deserve condemnation and descendants of slaves deserve compensation. You might even ask why all whites deserve blame for slavery, including whites whose ancestors owned no slaves, opposed slavery, fought and died in the Civil War to end slavery, or arrived in America after the Civil War.

Yet if you ask such questions, you will not be welcome in American research universities. Instead, you should affirm your commitment to “diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI),” which means excluding oppressors and particularly excluding anyone who disagrees that the world is divided into oppressor

and oppressed groups. Even if you already have tenure, at many universities (including my own) your annual raise will be partly determined by your “contribution” to DEI.

In this situation, many people who believe American higher education desperately needs reform understandably think we should simply give up on research universities. The implicit or explicit argument is that research universities are too far gone to reform and their research is so hopelessly tainted by leftism and overspecialization as to be worthless or harmful. As John Agresto puts it in his recent book, *The Death of Learning*,

The injection of graduate school analyses and specialization into the undergraduate curriculum has done much to diminish liberal education.... Yes, specialization has been the engine of progress in many of the advanced sciences and technology, but it is also the cause of so much smallness of mind and vision in the humanities.¹

Christopher Rufo writes in an even more recent book, *America's Cultural Revolution*, “The training ground for the New Left's capture of institutional pow-

er was the university," by which he primarily means research universities.²

So a good many people think we should either support liberal arts colleges that are not leftist (like St. John's College, of which Agresto was once president, and Hillsdale College), or create new liberal arts programs within existing universities (like the Hamilton Center at the University of Florida and the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University), or create new liberal arts institutions (like the University of Austin and Ralston College), or take over existing colleges (New College of Florida seems to be the only example so far).

In short, what we need is not researchers and theoreticians in major research universities (like Harvard and Berkeley) but teachers of the basic texts and heritage of Western civilization. Rufo concludes, "The counter-revolution must work not to seize the centralized institutions, but to disrupt and decentralize them in the interest of small, textured, and differentiated communities."³ This evidently means that we should try to disrupt and discredit research universities and to promote the right kind of liberal arts colleges instead.

Yet I believe that many conservatives' rejection of research universities is becoming a serious obstacle to reforming American higher education. Backed by a dominant cultural elite, American research universities are far too powerful to destroy. Damaging or discrediting them will harm the scientific, technical, and medical research that they do but

that liberal arts colleges cannot do. Research universities will continue to train the graduate students who will be hired as professors not just by research universities but by liberal arts colleges. The research universities will continue to attract most of the best students, who after graduating will take leading parts in politics, the media, and society and culture at large. The ideology of demonized oppressors and venerated victims will continue to dominate academic scholarship as long as research universities promote it. Conservatives who attack not just the current leftism of research universities but most academic research play into the hands of leftists who claim that conservatives disdain advanced education, research, and science. If we turn our backs on research universities, leftist researchers will turn still more ferociously on the few remaining non-leftist researchers. DEI ideologues are already targeting mathematics and the sciences, promoting and hiring not on the basis of academic qualifications but of leftist ideology.⁴

Although some conservatives think leftism at research universities can be curbed by legislation, most of the laws proposed so far will be either ineffective or counterproductive. Even if laws and court decisions stop the many universities that now require applicants for professorships to pledge their loyalty to "diversity, equity, and inclusion," leftist faculty and administrators will go on hiring only leftist applicants. Since requiring DEI pledges merely codifies earlier hiring practices at most universi-

ties, successful applicants will still swear loyalty to DEI. Laws requiring students to take courses in Western civilization, the Constitution, conservatism, or civics will result in courses that teach the evils of Western civilization, the Constitution, and conservatism. Abolishing or weakening tenure, the worst proposal of all, will let leftist faculty and administrators fire remaining non-leftist professors for their “insensitivity” and “lack of collegiality,” while defending leftist activists for their “productivity” and “service.” The main purpose of requiring DEI statements is not to prefer leftists in academic hiring (which is already a well-established practice) but to exclude non-leftists from universities altogether. Conservatives who imply that research universities are intrinsically leftist simply reinforce and justify the idea that non-leftists have no place in research universities.

In fact, most small liberal arts colleges (like Oberlin, Amherst, Wesleyan, and Sarah Lawrence) are just as monolithically leftist as research universities, or more so. A few liberal arts colleges are exceptions, and these may well be good for students who want a basic education before beginning a career in business, engineering, or law. But more ambitious students have found that a bachelor’s degree from a major research university offers many more opportunities than one from St. John’s or Hillsdale. Ron DiSantis went to Yale, Ted Cruz to Princeton, Josh Hawley to Stanford, and Tom Cotton and Elise Stefanik to Harvard, but to my knowledge no current

governor or member of Congress graduated from Hillsdale or St. John’s. When I taught at Hillsdale between 1983 and 1988, its administration cared mostly about self-promotion (“outreach”) and the quality of most of its courses was low, though it seems to have improved since then. While I favor assigning great books, I think St. John’s goes too far by teaching little else and not offering its students specific majors.

New College of Florida in Sarasota, a formerly “experimental” and “progressive” state college that was originally private, is now being reformed on the model of Hillsdale under a new president and board of trustees (which includes Christopher Rufo). New College is small (about 690 students and 120 faculty), like Hillsdale (about 1,600 students and 170 faculty) and St. John’s (about 780 students and 160 faculty) on two campuses in Annapolis and Santa Fe). Ralston College, an entirely new liberal arts college of the same general type as St. John’s, Hillsdale, and New College of Florida, was founded in Savannah in 2010 and opened for regular instruction in 2022, though it remains very small and not yet accredited.⁵ These institutions say and do many of the right things, avoid and oppose many of the wrong things, and at best give a good education to a few hundred students a year and employ a few conservative professors who would have trouble being hired elsewhere. But while every little bit can help, a handful of colleges of this sort and this size, no matter how good, cannot transform American education by themselves.

The University of Austin, founded in 2021 and open for instruction in fall 2024 though not yet accredited, was conceived as a more ambitious project. In a recent article, its provost described it as a “college of the future” that “will help rescue American higher education.”⁶ Its founders included former Harvard professor Niall Ferguson, former Harvard president Lawrence Summers, and other prominent names in American higher education, though none of them has joined the university’s regular faculty. Its president is a former president of St. John’s. But University of Austin faculty are not offered tenure, which is a feature of almost all colleges and universities that aspire to academic excellence, including Hillsdale and St. John’s. Another warning sign is the university’s proposed curriculum, which includes great books but highlights “Polaris Projects,” specialized multiyear plans that students define for themselves. Agresto has warned against this sort of program: “[V]ery often the least liberating education is the one where students get to pick and choose whatever suits their current fancy or confirms what they imagine their interests are, since it ratifies their currently held opinions and encourages them to run in place intellectually.”⁷ The University of Austin seems unlikely to offer a better education than St. John’s or Hillsdale.

Recently several state research universities have tried to offer an alternative to their dominant leftism by creating liberal arts programs separate from their regular academic departments, no-

tably the Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education at the University of Florida. The Hamilton Center, intended to become a distinct college of the university, will soon offer undergraduate majors in “philosophy, politics, economics and law” and “great books and ideas,” with other majors to follow. In an otherwise favorable article, the *Economist* observed that such programs face “two related challenges”: to find appropriate faculty and, even more difficult, to avoid “becoming conservative ghettos within their universities.”⁸ Ghettos are not only separate and small but usually considered inferior by the majority outside them.

The present leftism and intolerance of research universities is no proof that there is anything wrong with the basic idea of a research university, any more than the same problems in liberal arts colleges prove that there is anything wrong with the basic idea of a liberal arts college or of higher education in general. American colleges and universities have certainly grown worse and more intolerant since the academic job market collapsed around 1970. But this means that they used to be better and more tolerant and could become so again. The essential problem is some fifty years of hiring bad professors, who have in turn hired even worse professors, as Rufo has observed: “Over time, the radicals shifted to the university as a whole, securing positions of influence, legitimizing their ideas in sympathetic journals, purging reactionaries from the faculty, and recruiting cohorts of gradu-

ate students who would transform the spirit of the revolutionary communiqués into a dense academic mass.”⁹ Agresto is right that by now most graduate students and new assistant professors are overspecialized leftist ideologues. That is what most academic departments want, train, and hire. The cycle can only be broken by reforming the system of academic hiring, now dominated by leftist professors who hire other leftists.

Most academic hiring is done by university departments, which with the permission of administrators draw up job advertisements, read job applications, and choose candidates to interview and hire. Many job advertisements not only demand commitment to DEI but require specialization in some aspect of race or gender. During interviews, candidates are often eliminated merely on suspicion of being conservative or religious. As early as 1988 a professor who interviewed me at Florida International University guessed correctly that I was a Republican; I later learned that I was hired only because his colleagues were unable to believe something so improbable without clear proof.

In 2020 an interviewer asked one of my students, a convert to Eastern Orthodoxy, why she ate no meat at lunch on a Friday in Lent; though she had the presence of mind to say she was a vegetarian, she soon decided to leave the academic profession, partly because of that incident. Most department members are poorly prepared to select the best candidates from hundreds of applicants in fields outside their own specialties and are mainly interested in hiring compat-

ible colleagues who follow current academic fashions.

Often the university administration makes things worse by eliminating candidates whose DEI statements it considers unsatisfactory before the department can see their applications. The relevant administrator, usually a dean of arts and sciences, is seldom a distinguished scholar or qualified to evaluate applicants throughout the humanities and social and natural sciences, but is well aware of DEI and similar fashions in academic hiring. University presidents, most of whom are not scholars and have many responsibilities outside academics, have even less time or expertise than the deans bring to hiring professors. A major reason that critics like Rufo and Agresto favor small liberal arts colleges is probably that they are small enough that their administrators can consider all applications for professorships. Conservative administrators can usually identify and eliminate leftist applicants, whose views are obvious from their work and interests. Yet since these administrators too have trouble telling how good an applicant’s research is, they are liable to hire merely competent teachers rather than outstanding and pioneering scholars who might help change American academics for the better.

In a recent issue of *Academic Questions* (“A Strategy for Reforming American Universities,” Fall 2023) I proposed a strategy that could be used to reform even research universities by appointing new deans and department chairmen.¹⁰ This strategy could work only at state universities in states with Republican

governors and legislatures; but those include some of the most important research universities in the country, not just the University of Florida but the University of Texas at Austin, Ohio State University, Indiana University, the University of Iowa, and the University of Georgia. A university that followed this strategy should begin by appointing a new dean with responsibility for hiring senior scholars as department chairmen. For a dean who is a good senior scholar, hiring other good senior scholars as departmental chairmen, even outside the dean's field, is much easier than hiring good junior scholars. Senior scholars, most of whom were hired when leftists had less control over academic hiring than they have now, have published enough and been active enough to show what sort of thinkers they are; some have even joined the NAS, Heterodox Academy, or the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE). The new departmental chairmen, given authority to override other members of their departments with the consent of the dean, could then be assigned the more difficult task of hiring good junior scholars.

Some people may doubt that enough candidates with strong credentials and without leftist prejudices can be found to hire as new department chairmen and professors. In today's academic climate no one can be quite sure how many non-leftist professors there are, because such professors have good reasons to hide their views. Yet a confidential survey of professors in 2022 by FIRE found that 17 percent identified themselves as

"moderate," 25 percent identified themselves as "conservative," and 50 percent thought that required statements by applicants affirming a commitment to DEI "are an ideological litmus test that violates academic freedom."¹¹ While a "moderate" or "conservative" professor may be to the left of moderates or conservatives in the population at large (one study found only 4 percent of U.S. faculty voted for Trump in 2020),¹² the fact that half the professors surveyed disliked mandatory DEI statements is encouraging, even if they feared to express their dislike openly. In any case, the aim of reformers of research universities should be not to replace DEI with a conservative litmus test but to hire the best teachers and researchers, who will judge others' teaching and research on the basis of its quality and not of the race or gender of the person who does it.

Excellent scholars still go to graduate school, though their numbers are gradually decreasing, and many excellent scholars are still teaching, though often at obscure institutions. Over the last forty years I have served on some two dozen search committees for history professors at Hillsdale, Florida International University, and Saint Louis University, and participated in many more searches as a department member. None of these three is a leading university, but the academic job market is so bad that we received applications from most of the leading graduate programs in the country.

The great majority of the searches were for tenure-track assistant professors, though a few were for associate

professors or endowed chairs. We often had more than a hundred applicants. Almost every search included at least one truly outstanding candidate who did research of obvious breadth and importance and showed no ideological bias. In fact, the best candidates were scarcely ever leftists, probably because most leftist academics care more about ideology than about academic standards. Though I regret to say that my departments seldom chose the best candidate, sometimes the best candidate already had a job—or later found a job—at an institution with a worse academic reputation than ours. Outstanding scholars still exist, if you want to hire them.

Hiring outstanding scholars may however require you to break some unwritten rules that most academic job searches now follow. If the scholars are outstanding, you should hire them even if they now teach at an obscure institution, have a job outside academia, have no regular job at all, are over sixty years old, or have retired (if they will come out of retirement). You should definitely not exclude applicants for department chairmen who have no administrative experience, since leftism is now usually a requirement for an administrative position. You should emphasize the authority, independence, and administrative support the department chairmen will have and offer them a higher salary than they now have, because presiding over what may well be a hostile department will often be difficult, at least at first. Besides, though many of the candidates would be leaving institutions where

they are badly paid, badly treated, and generally unhappy, many would have put down roots where they now live and often have a spouse who would need to find a new job if they moved. Coming out of retirement also has drawbacks, even for professors who retired early because they disliked their institutions so much.

Any university that follows this strategy should be careful to uphold both academic excellence and academic freedom, particularly for professors hired under the former system. The university's administrators and chairmen should be candid about what they are doing and should expect and answer criticisms from opponents who assert that "diversity, equity, and inclusion" are more important than academic freedom and excellence. If the administrators make their case well, they will win over a large majority of voters and taxpayers and even many professors, and a healthy clash of opinions should make the university a better and more open place. The administrators should emphasize that their critics have a right to their opinions and are protected from dismissal for their views as a matter of academic freedom. The new chairmen and the professors they select should be distinguished enough scholars and teachers that they cannot credibly be accused of being hired only for ideological reasons. Faculty and students who object to the new hiring procedures should be asked to defend their insistence on ideological exclusion at the expense of academic distinction. In most states, the new sys-

tem should be a political advantage for the governors and legislators who introduce it.

This strategy cannot now be enacted at most private institutions or at public institutions in Democratic states. For the present the supply of good academics who are not leftists may be too small for the strategy to be applied at all research universities anyway. But even if only a few major state research universities adopt it, they will hire many fine scholars who can express their views freely in the classroom and outside it, can publish important research combating uncritical leftism, and can train graduate students like themselves who can find academic jobs at these research universities and perhaps at others. If the reformed research universities do their hiring well, one or more of them should soon rival such badly compromised research universities as Harvard and Berkeley, which are no longer trying to pursue academic excellence as they chase their ideas of social justice. A state research university that seriously attempts to be the best university in the country will become unignorable and will influence other research universities in a way that even the most outstanding small liberal arts college cannot. But if we simply ignore research universities, we cannot hope to reform American higher education.

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1. John Agresto, *The Death of Learning: How American Education Has Failed Our Students and What to do about It* (New York: Encounter Books, 2022), 165-66.
2. Christopher Rufo, *America's Cultural Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything* (New York: Broadside Books, 2023), 45.
3. Rufo, *America's Cultural Revolution*, 281.
4. See John Tierney, "DEI v. Science," *City Journal*, August 27, 2024.
5. For a preliminary and favorable evaluation, see Joshua T. Katz, "Logos in Savannah," *City Journal*, January 11, 2023.
6. Jacob Howland, "College of the Future," *City Journal*, Winter 2023.
7. Agresto, *Death of Learning*, 21. The "Polaris Projects" may be an overreaction to student complaints about the strict academic requirements at St. John's, especially the absence of a choice of majors.
8. "A Challenge to Leftist Bias Moves into America's Public Universities," *Economist*, April 11, 2024.
9. Rufo, *America's Cultural Revolution*, 42.
10. "A Strategy for Reforming American Universities," *Academic Questions*, Fall 2023, 11-18.
11. See FIRE, "The Academic Mind in 2022: What Faculty Think About Free Expression and Academic Freedom" (<https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/academic-mind-2022-what-faculty-think-about-free-expression-and-academic-freedom>).
12. Eric Kaufmann, *Academic Freedom in Crisis: Punishment, Political Discrimination, and Self-Censorship*, CSPI Report No. 2, March 1, 2021.