

Organizing for a Just and Democratic Future

Higher education faces existential threats.

By Todd Wolfson and Mia McIver



Colleges and universities in the United States are under siege, and higher education workers are the primary targets. Right-wing forces, emboldened by powerful political and economic interests, are [striving](#) to [dismantle](#) our [institutions](#). By systematically targeting the very foundations of higher education, they are also attacking labor rights and democracy itself. Through intimidation, censorship, and economic coercion, the current administration is working to hollow out colleges and universities, destroy the labor movement, and erase economic, cultural, and scientific progress.

The ground has been softened by decades of federal and state disinvestment from higher education, resulting in skyrocketing tuition, crushing student debt, and the corporatization of our campuses. The exploitation of contingent labor, the concentration of campus resources in administrative functions, aggressive corporate and partisan interference in college and university governance, and devastating restructurings have all combined to weaken the power of faculty, staff, and students.

Up until January 21, 2025, the humanities, arts, and social sciences had been under the most strain. Culled for closure by senior administrators, sometimes using high-priced consultants such as [rpk Group](#)

for cover, these academic fields have been framed as offering a poor return on student investment. This framing places the blame for low enrollments in targeted programs on students and faculty, when in fact the institutions themselves—in focusing on their own return on investment—are responsible. If degrees in humanistic disciplines are too expensive for students and their families to justify, that is because colleges and universities have already conceded—disastrously—that higher education should be debt-financed instead of free.

Campus and program closures, mergers, and consolidations have damaged an essential element of academic freedom that [the AAUP has championed](#) but is not discussed often enough: the right to listen and to hear as part of the right to examine issues and seek truth. Foreclosing objects of study—the unavoidable consequence of shuttering academic departments—deprives students of their proper right to learn. Today's repressive regime unites the financial and partisan interests in campus quiescence.

And now the physical and life sciences, biomedical research, and clinical applications have been swept up in the net. It is no exaggeration to say that lives are at stake. Federal research grants have funded tremendous innovations in health since World War II. Current executive orders would halt research on cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and Alzheimer's disease, impeding lifesaving scientific advances. The people who will suffer most are elderly patients, children, and the critically ill who depend on clinical trials to achieve medical breakthroughs that can save their lives. Future advances to prevent and cure disease will depend on continued federal support of basic science. We must also be able to educate and mentor students who will ultimately lead us to those advances.

The administration's [slashing of indirect cost rates](#) in grants administered by the National Institutes of Health and its punitive cancellations of funding for equity-oriented work are direct attempts to debilitate essential medical research, disrupt scientific inquiry, and create a chilling effect. The unprecedented threat to deprive Columbia University of \$400 million in research funding is an act of economic blackmail intended to enforce conformity to ideological mandates. Similarly, the demand that Columbia place its Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies Department under academic receivership mirrors the censorship and ideological purges of the McCarthy era.

The deliberate targeting of research institutions sends a clear message: Comply with the administration's demands or be financially starved into submission. The drive to dismantle the Department of Education is an open declaration that education itself is a threat to the president's agenda. His administration would rather gut higher education institutions than allow them to function as spaces of free inquiry.

Shockingly, university administrators and governing boards seem prepared to sacrifice their students and their workers to the insatiable appetite of the Trump administration. Columbia's capitulation to the administration's demands goes beyond anticipatory obedience into full-on conformity. Presidents, provosts, and governing boards are demonstrating that their financial interests rule over and rule out higher education as a public good.

Therefore, we ourselves must protect the workers who make colleges and universities run. Without our labor, without civil rights, academic freedom, and economic security, the pursuit of knowledge is impossible.

Fifty years ago, higher education was one of the most respected sectors in the country; today, public confidence in higher education is distressingly low as we face relentless attacks from those who seek to bend its transformative potential toward their narrow partisan agenda.

The Imperative for Collective Action

The AAUP is developing [a unified, strategic, and militant response](#) to these existential threats. Nothing less will suffice in this moment. Students and faculty have long been on the front lines of the labor movement, of protest, and of resistance to political oppression. Campus workers across the country have engaged in powerful acts of resistance, but our movement has remained fragmented. That's why the AAUP is a founding member of [Labor for Higher Education](#), a national multiunion coalition organizing to defend higher education as the bedrock of democracy and as an engine of social mobility, innovation, and progress. With our Labor for Higher Education partners, we are currently leading a mass mobilization to stand up for academic freedom, research and academic integrity, and the rights of workers against a rising tide of political repression.

We need to build solidarity internally, too, within our chapters and on our campuses, across ranks and titles, and among students, staff, and faculty. Through our affiliation with the AFT, we are united with K–12 educators and health-care workers. We are allied with federal workers and other civil servants in serving the common interest. This collaboration is important because collective action on a mass scale is the only way to reclaim higher education as a public good.

Higher Education and the Labor Movement

The crisis in higher education is not occurring in isolation. It is part of a broader assault on labor, public goods, and democracy itself. Decades of neoliberal policies have weakened unions, gutted social programs, and enriched corporate elites at the expense of working people. Some colleges and universities have epitomized these trends, operating as engines of economic precarity rather than opportunity. The rise of the gig economy has compelled other sectors of the economy to adopt new strategies, and higher education unions must do the same. We must embrace transformative unionism that aligns the struggles of faculty and staff with those of our students and communities. When students, contingent faculty, and poorly paid staff face housing insecurity, food instability, environmental inequities, and racialized austerity, entire communities suffer.

The administration has escalated [attacks](#) on graduate workers, faculty, and staff, seeking to undermine collective bargaining rights, reduce worker protections, and silence labor organizing within the academy. The [expulsion and firing](#) of student union leaders is a blatant attempt to break labor power in higher education. These efforts are not confined to colleges and universities—they are part of a broader strategy to dismantle unions, depress wages, and strip workers of power across all industries.

If our goal is to protect scientific progress, humanistic inquiry, academic freedom, and liberties of expression and association, then we must protect the jobs and civil rights of college and university teachers, researchers, staff, and students. Doing so will build the power of the labor movement, enable worker coalitions, and forge cross-sector solidarity. This is the organizing model that can push back against authoritarian encroachment.

Forging a Coherent National Vision

In the recent past, [AAUP chapters across](#) the [country](#) have led the charge in defending academic freedom and the right to protest, often stepping into leadership roles when administrators, trustees, and regents have failed. This moment demands that AAUP members play a central role in defining the future of higher education, because that future must be radically reimagined.

We have to remember that the vast majority of college teachers, and the vast majority of college students, work and study in community colleges and public universities. A supermajority of faculty are employed in contingent and financially precarious jobs. College instructors are often paid less than the K–12 teachers who work in the same city. Their experiences and their voices are central to understanding what higher education is, does, and needs.

Even as we defend what is under attack, we keep an affirmative vision in sight: free college, fair wages, job security, and a democratic academic environment where all members of our college and university communities—faculty, staff, and students—have a voice in governance. Achieving this vision will require more than defensive battles; it will demand proactive campaigns that articulate higher education’s indispensable role in a democratic society.

To win this fight, we must harness the collective power of our unions, our students, and our communities. We must build a movement that not only resists the forces of austerity and authoritarianism but also advances a transformative vision for public higher education. This is not merely a struggle for our profession—it is a struggle for the future of democracy itself.

Fascists and would-be dictators have always been well aware of dual threats to their control: Educators, by stoking critical inquiry and prompting people to ask questions, can challenge their rule; and labor unions, in democratic practices through which members align themselves toward specific goals, can challenge their autocracy. Higher education unionists are in the crosshairs now because we work in this exact intersection. And that means we have a unique ability and a unique responsibility to lead this fight.

Todd Wolfson is president of the AAUP and associate professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers University. Mia McIver is executive director of the AAUP.